

## National Louis University Digital Commons@NLU

---

### Dissertations

---

11-2017

# The Educational Experiences Of Biracial Students As Seen Through The Eyes Of Their Parents

Sandra Washington

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.nl.edu/diss>

Part of the [Liberal Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Washington, Sandra, "The Educational Experiences Of Biracial Students As Seen Through The Eyes Of Their Parents" (2017).  
*Dissertations*. 250.  
<https://digitalcommons.nl.edu/diss/250>

This Dissertation - Public Access is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons@NLU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@NLU. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@nl.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@nl.edu).

THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF BIRACIAL STUDENTS AS SEEN  
THROUGH THE EYES OF THEIR PARENTS

Sandra A. Washington

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of  
Doctor of Education  
in the Foster G. McGaw Graduate School

National College of Education

National-Louis University

October, 2017

Copyright by Sandra A. Washington, 2017  
All rights reserved

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to gain a better understanding of the issues and challenges biracial children and their parents face as they navigate through the U.S. K–12 school system while developing a firm sense of self and racial identity. This issue is important because of the growing number of biracial children in the U.S. today. “Among American children, the multiracial population has increased almost 50 percent, to 4.2 million, since 2000, making it the fastest growing youth group in the country” (Saulny, 2011, p. A3). Three couples, one single father, and one mother were interviewed about their experiences raising biracial children. Each child had one African American parent and the other White. The primary research question was: What can we learn about the school experience of biracial children as seen through the eyes of their parents? Four themes emerged from the parent interview data: (a) at times, a disconnect between home and school cultures needs to be bridged; (b) the value of exposing their children to different cultures and groups of people; (c) the need to prepare their children for racism; and (d) the imperative of having open and honest discussions with their children about race and racism. Implications of this study address biracial child and adolescent identity development, parents and families, and teachers and teaching practice.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my committee for their generous gifts of time, expertise, and support. I especially hold deep gratitude for my dissertation chair, Dr. Norman Weston, for his invaluable guidance and wisdom. His unwavering support energized me to complete my doctorate.

I will forever be grateful to my loving family for their never-ending patience, encouragement, and support, especially my dear husband and children, my dad, my stepmother, and my mother-in-law who have all been extremely understanding and caring throughout this dissertation process and its various challenges.

To the families and individuals who agreed to participate in this study, I am truly thankful to you for your insightfulness and willingness to contribute to this important research. I could not have conducted my study without your giving spirit.

I also extend my sincerest appreciation to all of my colleagues and friends who have traveled this journey with me and held me up in a variety of ways, especially Brenda Vela and Cindy Corona-Long.

Finally, I would like to thank God. With God, all things are possible. This dissertation is proof of that.

## DEDICATION

In loving memory of my mother, Heidi Rondou (nee Foerster), and my grandmother,

Ruth VanBoxtel (nee Foerster), who both believed in me.

To my wonderful children, Tyrus and Stefanie Washington,

who inspire me each and every day.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	vi
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .....	1
Rationale .....	3
Research Questions .....	6
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	7
Historical Perspective .....	7
Critical Race Theory .....	9
Identity Models .....	9
Parenting Concerns .....	12
Awareness of Race and Educational Issues .....	14
Bi-Ethnic/Biracial Educational Trends .....	18
Summary .....	20
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY .....	21
Introduction .....	21
Research Questions .....	21
Methodology .....	22
Critical Race Theory .....	22
Interviewing .....	23
Narrative Inquiry .....	23
Demographics .....	24
Data Collection .....	25

Data Analysis .....	25
Limitations .....	26
Researcher’s Perspective .....	27
Ethical Issues .....	28
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS .....	29
Participant Biographies .....	29
Andy .....	30
Jane .....	30
The Williams Family .....	30
The Walton Family .....	31
The Johnson Family .....	31
Interview Themes.....	31
Theme 1: The Disconnect Between Home and School Cultures.....	32
Theme 2: Exposure To Different Cultures and Groups of People.....	35
Theme 3: Preparing for Racism .....	40
Theme 4: Being Open and Honest.....	49
Summary .....	52
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS .....	54
Introduction.....	54
Question 1: What Are the Challenges of Raising a Biracial Child.....	54
Question 2: What Discussions About Race Do Parents of Biracial Children Have With Their Children .....	57
Question 3: Does Being Biracial Affect A Child’s Development, If So, How? .....	60



Question 4: How Does the School Experience of Biracial Children Differ	
From Other Children.....	63
Implications.....	67
Identity Development .....	68
Parents and Families .....	69
Teachers and Teaching Practice .....	71
Personal Reflection .....	73
REFERENCES .....	76
APPENDIX A: Interview Questions .....	81
APPENDIX B: Informed Consent Form .....	82

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

When my children were very young, my son Tyrus was four years old and my daughter Stefanie was two years old, I decided to take them to the local McDonalds for lunch. After we got our food, we sat down to eat. An elderly couple was sitting directly across from us. The woman remarked, "Wow! Those children are so beautiful. You are really lucky." I smiled politely and said, "Thank you." The woman continued by asking how old they were. I explained that they were two and four. She did ask if I was their mom, and I answered, "Yes." She made a few more comments about how they had the cutest eyelashes, the most beautiful eyes, and my daughter's hair was just gorgeous. Again I smiled politely and replied, "Thank you." I was not quite prepared for what she asked me next: "How did you get so lucky that you got to adopt two children?" I could not believe my ears. What was I supposed to say? I politely corrected her, "No, they are mine." The couple exited the restaurant shortly after our conversation. I was still shocked. I could not believe it. I know my children did not look a lot like me, but for someone to think they were not my children was just beyond me. I never really sat down and thought about how my children looked before. Did they really look that different from me?

When they each were born, I fell in love with them instantly. I became the protective "mother bear." Before my son was born, my husband and I had taken some classes. There the teacher warned us about keeping the newborns in the room with us because, she said, "You never know what will happen when they were out of your sight." After we had our son, my husband thought it would be a good idea if the staff, in the hospital, would take Ty to the nursery. In the morning, Al, my husband, left for work, and

the nurse brought Ty back into the room. When I went to change his diaper, he had a huge mark across his butt that looked like a very dark bruise. I was really upset. How could I have let this happen? When the nurse came back into the room, I asked her what happened to my child. I explained that he had a bruise on his butt. She started laughing and in her deep Jamaican accent replied, “Dear, sometimes children who have their skin tone have Mongolian marks when they are born.”

Two years ago, I realized once again how different my children must look from me. I went to Tennessee with my parents, and we stopped at a Burger King. There was an African American woman behind me in line with her four children. Stefinie, my daughter, said, “Mom can I have chicken nuggets? Apple fries?” I said, “Yes, you can have whatever you want.” The women looked at us and then asked, “Are those children yours?” I said, “Yes.” She added, “They are really beautiful.” I responded, “Thanks.” Afterwards my parents and I discussed the situation.

These incidents were the only few times when I really thought about how my children differed from me. I see them as loving human beings, and I really do not see them by the color of their skin. I do not think about how different they are from me. I never really think about how different we must look to other people.

During my son’s preschool years, we decided to send him to a private preschool. The majority of the students there were white. The classes were small, with only 10 students, and the majority of the parents who sent their children there made well over \$100,000 a year. After our son completed preschool, my husband and I had a number of conversations about education and where our son should attend elementary school. We decided the best place would be a public school close to our house. The school closest to

our house had a predominantly White student population. At Kennedy Elementary School in southeast Wisconsin, approximately 10% of their students were African American out of a total of approximately 500 students. We enrolled him at Kennedy Elementary.

In addition to my son attending Kennedy Elementary, I was also a teacher in the school district; therefore, I knew that everyone of us had to go through cultural competency training. Before the training, I thought I was pretty culturally competent. However, until I took the culture competency class, I did not realize how much I really had to learn. During the class, I suddenly realized that my children are seen as African American. I would wake up and wonder if Tyrus were running down the street, would police officers think he was African American and shoot first and ask questions later? As my children grow up, will they be followed in stores by security personnel because of their skin color? Will they be able to live wherever they want? At times, this was very disturbing to me.

I realized, at this time, as a parent of African American children, I needed to take the time to process all the information about my culture and my heritage as well as the culture and heritage of my husband and children. I had not realized how much their European American culture was emphasized and how little we discussed their African American culture.

### **Rationale**

The topic of this dissertation arises from several factors and events that have occurred in my life, as well as our history as a nation and what is happening in the United States today. Throughout history in the United States, African Americans have been discriminated against, beginning with slavery when the United States government came

up with the one-drop rule. According to this rule, for all intents and purposes, if any person had even one drop of African blood, then the person would be considered African (Davis, 2001). The one-drop rule was actually upheld in the courts. This rule was one way to ensure the descendants of a slave would remain a slave (Davis, 2001). Therefore, historically, my children would have been considered slaves.

The purpose of this study was to capture the experience of interracial couples, specifically those comprised of one African American and one White parent who were raising biracial children and navigating through a public school system. According to Saulny (2011), the number of biracial children is growing in the United States. Since 2000, the multiracial population among children grew by 50% to 4.2 million. This information is important, not only for schools, but also for society as a whole. In order to understand how to best support these children as they are growing up, it is important to understand the struggles interracial couples experience while raising their biracial children.

According to Lee (2005), cultural difference/discontinuity scholars believe the problems many children of color face in school are due to cultural differences/mismatches between the students' home culture and the school culture. In contrast, many other educators believe that color and culture make no difference; all people are the same and should be treated accordingly. However, this type of culture blindness can lead students to feel discounted or invisible in school (Lindsey, Robbins, & Terrell, 2006). To address this phenomenon, Lee (2005) asserted that schools need to adopt culturally sensitive pedagogy to accommodate the cultural differences of their students. Without addressing the issues biracial children face, these children may

struggle, like other ethnic groups have, with lower achievement, higher dropout rates, and lower social mobility.

This study was important to me from an educational standpoint because of the growing number of biracial children in our school district and as a parent of biracial children. As a district, there are still policies or practices in place that negatively affect students. For example, according to an August 18, 2008 article on Parentdish.com, Vanessa Lovelace and her son were very excited because they had just moved to southeastern Wisconsin. She wanted to enroll him at his new school. On the enrollment form, she was asked to check her son's racial identity. Since none of the options fit her son, Vanessa decided to pick two. She checked African American and White. The secretary told her she could only choose one option. If she did not choose one, then the secretary would have to choose the option that she felt was most fitting. Vanessa's son explained that by only being allowed to check one box, it made him feel sad because it would force him to only recognize one of his parents (Maple, 2008).

According to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, as reported by Maple (2008), a multi-race category has been allowed since 2007, but this did not go into effect for all Wisconsin schools until the 2010–2011 school year. This demographic data is gathered by the federal government and may be used for indirect funding. It is important to understand the plight of biracial children by researching the parent's perspective of working with a school system. I believe throughout this study, I learned a great deal about the biracial child, and, because of that, I am better prepared to work with biracial children in the educational setting as well as on the home front.

## Research Questions

The primary research question that guided this study is: *What can we learn about the school experience of biracial children as seen through the eyes of their parents?*

The secondary questions that flowed from this primary question and further guided this study are:

- *What are the challenges of raising a biracial child?*
- *What discussions about race do parents of biracial children have with their children?*
- *Does being biracial affect a child's identity development? If so, how?*
- *How does the school experience of biracial children differ from that of other children?*

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review summary includes the most relevant literature on the topic of interracial couples and their biracial children. The review begins with a discussion of the historical classification of people in the United States. This discussion is followed by a review of critical race theory, identity models, parenting concerns, awareness of race and educational issues, and bi-ethnic and biracial educational trends.

#### **Historical Perspective**

Throughout history in the United States, beginning with slavery, African Americans have been discriminated against. During this time, the United States government instituted the one-drop rule which stipulated that if any person had even one drop of African blood, then the person would be considered African both legally and socially (Davis, 2001). The one-drop rule was actually upheld in the courts. This rule was one way to ensure the descendants of a slave would remain a slave (Davis, 2001). However, if biracial individuals had light skin, then they were allowed more freedom than the darker biracial individuals. Wright (1998) noted that as far back as slavery, light complexioned Blacks were given preferential treatment because they were usually the offspring of the White owners and Black slaves. They usually worked as a house servant, whereas the dark complexioned Blacks were assigned the more difficult jobs in the field, stables, and on other places of hard labor.

In Virginia, before 1967, there was an absolute prohibition against a White person marrying any person other than a White person (Pascoe, 2004). However, in 1967, the U.S. Supreme Court decision, in *Loving vs. the State of Virginia*, overturned the



remaining state laws prohibiting interracial marriages (Jackson, 2010). Jackson (2010) claimed that this decision led to an increase in the number of interracial marriages, which drastically increased the population of biracial children. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, nationwide, approximately 2.4% of the population, which is over 6.8 million, is a combination of two or more races (CensusScope, n.d.). Root's (1992) examination of the 1992 U.S. Census discovered that the number of biracial Black/White babies had increased more than 500% since 1970. Therefore, biracial individuals have become one of the fastest growing populations in the United States (Baxley, 2008).

On November 4, 2008, the United States of America elected the first biracial president, Barack Obama. Even though society has changed over time, the way people identify themselves, however, has not changed. For example, on many governmental forms, people are asked to identify their race as White, Hispanic, Black, American Indian or Alaska Native, or Pacific Islander. People in the United States will identify other people based on these racial categories. Biracial identities potentially disrupt the "white of color" dichotomy, and thus call into question the assumptions on which racial inequality is based; society has a difficult time acknowledging this section of the population (Baxley, 2008.). Biracial people have always been an issue for U. S. society because they go against the structure of America's racial order of identifying oneself as White, Hispanic, Black, American Indian or Alaska Native, or Pacific Islander, and White privilege preservation (Baxley, 2008). Nakashima (1992) suggested that people who do not neatly fit into a clearly defined race category threaten the psychological and sociological foundations of the "we" and "they" mentality that determines so much of an individual's social, economic, and political experience in the United States.

## **Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory developed from a legal theory that looked at how race and racism influenced the laws and society (Parker & Lynn, 2002). Delgado and Stefancic (2001) explained that critical race theory is a way to study and transform relationships among race, racism, and power. Critical race theory mirrors civil rights movements but includes broader topics such as economics, history, context, group, and self-interest (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Institutionalized racism is an important aspect of critical race theory. Racism goes beyond acts of individual discrimination, violence, and/or exclusion. Race and racism are systemic and are embedded in our laws and policies, as well as everyday practice (Young & Laible, 2000).

Critical race theory can be applied in educational settings; more specifically, it can be used to scrutinize, define, expose, and address educational problems (Parker & Lynn, 2002). Critical race theory is based on everyday life experiences that build perspective and viewpoint through the art of storytelling in order to gain a better understanding of how Americans see race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Critical race theory can be used to gain insight into the educational experiences of biracial students. It is imperative that a voice is given to people of different races so as to gain a very personal narrative that allows the experiences and lessons learned to be conveyed in order to empower people to act (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006).

## **Identity Models**

Given the increasing number of biracial individuals in society, it is important to understand the issues of race and how multiracial individuals have been identified and researched in literature. These models may give a perspective on the different stages a

multiracial individual might go through. Interestingly, the theories of identity correlate to the thinking of the particular time period in which the theory was developed. Helms (1990) pointed out that Blacks and Whites have two different reasons for forming racial identity. Blacks use identity theory for understanding themselves within society. Whites, however, do not even consider identity theory because of the privileges that their whiteness has given within society. It is only when Whites begin to examine the privileges they receive due to their “whiteness” that they begin to have a racial understanding in relationship to others (Helms, 1990).

The marginal man theory is a theory based on the idea that a racially-mixed person living in a racially divided world is a problem. This theory took root when the one-drop rule was a law in many states. Park’s (1928) marginal man theory is based on a conflict of different cultures. The marginal man is a period marked by despair because biracial persons will never feel like whole persons because they do not belong to only one race. These people have to live as only one race in their cultural life and traditions even though they belong within two different racial groups of people. Due to the racial prejudice in the United States rooted in slavery, a biracial individual will never be able to completely feel like one person, especially with their White heritage; consequently, they are usually defined by society as Black individuals (Park, 1928).

Then, in the 1960s, the civil rights movement and the Black power movement came into existence. Rockquemore, Brunson, and Delgado (2009) found that biracial individuals who had darker skin were expected to embrace their “blackness” and develop a sense of pride and positive attitudes regarding their Black identity. The vast majority of the Black population in the United States was racially mixed. Consequently, society

found no reason to differentiate between those who were mixed by immediate parentage and those who were racially mixed over generations (Rockquemore et al., 2009).

Therefore, during this time period, mixed individuals were supposed to develop positive views about their blackness.

Then, in 1990, Poston developed the biracial developmental model based on an integrated model that is twofold. This model has five stages of personal identity for biracial youth and each person must reach the final stage in order to have an identity that incorporates both races (Poston 1990):

1. Personal Identity—Biracial children display identification problems when they internalize outside prejudices and values. But their feelings of self-esteem and self-worth come from within their family.
2. Choice of Group Categorization—This was for youth-age students. They are pushed to choose one ethnic group to identify with.
3. Enmeshment/Denial—This stage takes place during the teenage years and is where the individual feels confused and guilty because they have to choose one ethnic identity.
4. Appreciation stage—This is where they begin to appreciate their multiple identities and broaden their knowledge about their ethnicity, however, still only identifying with one group.
5. Integration—This is where the individual experiences wholeness, integration, and value of all their racial and ethnic identities.

Today, one approach to racial identity development is an ecological approach (Rockquemore et al., 2009). Using the ecological approach, mixed-race people construct

different identities based on the context, and there are no predictable stages of identity development or an end point. This model also allows for the possibility that biracial individuals may not identify with any race except for the human race (Rockquemore et al., 2009).

These models represent several ways in which to interpret the complex experiences of biracial individuals. The models offer an understanding of racial attitudes and self-concepts. They also offer a way to decipher how mixed-race people make choices about who they feel comfortable socializing with and the reasons why (Gilbert, 2005). When using these models, one must be careful to ensure that they are not placing biracial individuals into a fixed category.

### **Parenting Concerns**

As a parent of biracial children, I believe that we really need to understand the issues of race and racism. To raise self-confident biracial children, we need to expose our children to a diverse community and truly help the child understand who he or she is. Children raised in families who have healthy self-identities minimize racial issues. Biracial children who learn from their parents that they do not have to accept one race over another are better prepared to deal with the pressures from society (Moore, 2006). Biracial children from homes that describe themselves as “mixed” or biracial do not over identify with their Black or White heritage (Wright, 1998).

O’Donoghue (2005) interviewed 11 White mothers of biracial, Black/White adolescents to determine whether and how these mothers socialize their children to the issues of race and ethnicity. All the mothers in the study felt that the presence of an African American partner was very vital to the process because their husbands had

educated them about African American culture and fostered the growth in their knowledge of ethnicity. The majority of the families in this study did not choose to live in either an all-Black or an all-White community. The women in this study chose a geographical community to live in that they considered would be most hospitable and the least hostile toward the racial composition of their family.

Kerwin, Ponterotto, Jackson, and Harris (1993) described a qualitative study of issues salient in the development of racial identity for school children of Black/White racial heritage. One of the major themes that emerged from interviewing the parents was the theme of preparing the child for anticipated discrimination. Many parents expressed concern about racial discrimination. Black parents reported that they tend to be more conscious and aware of discrimination than their White spouses. The Black parent also identified a need to more actively prepare their child or children to deal with racism and prejudice. A final theme that emerged was location. Many parents discussed the choice of where to bring up their child or children. According to Nakazawa (2003),

when multicultural children are able to see themselves reflected in their own community, they have a broader array of positive multiracial role models, a greater comfort level with their own identity and a strong internalized sense that it's okay to be racially different. (p. 158)

Tatum (2003) asserted that children who are biracial with Black heritage need to have positive ties to a Black community otherwise it will be difficult for that child to value both sides of his or her heritage.

Crawford and Alaggia (2010) focused on family influences on mixed-race youth who identified themselves as part African American and European (White) origin. Looking at the experiences of eight young people of mixed race gave the authors some insight into what shaped their racial identity. The first theme found in the Crawford and

Alaggia study was the lack of parental awareness and understanding of their mixed-race experience. This is due to the fact that the parents themselves were not of mixed racial background. The second theme was the need for validation of being of mixed-race heritage and the good and negative experiences that resulted. The third theme was that the silence of family members around the topic of race might be the result of *color-blind* notions that have prevailed in North America since the 1970s. Finally, the need to have contact and exposure to both parents' racial backgrounds was cited by the youth participants as being important.

Johnson (2004), a White mother, wrote a dissertation about her personal experiences of raising two biracial children. She chose to send her children to a school having predominately African American students. She chose a school where her children could identify with other students through race, religion, and socioeconomic status. She believed that biracial children must be empowered and taught in school about who they are, just like African American mothers teach their children about pride and empowerment. She believed this helps her children create a strong identity because they see other children who look like them.

With the ever-increasing number of interracial marriages and biracial children, we cannot ignore the needs of these children when they enter our school doors. Schools are one place where biracial children must deal with other people's assumptions about their families (Steel, 1995)

### **Awareness of Race and Educational Implications**

Babies are not born knowing about skin color or racial awareness. However, as these babies grow into toddlers, they live in a magical world of make-believe. At this

time, children are just beginning to learn the names of different colors, so it is difficult for them to describe their skin color or the skin color of other people (Wright, 1998). Wright (1998) explained that most three-year-olds can tell if they are a boy or girl, but struggle with identifying themselves by color or race.

As children grow, they become more aware of color identification. Wright (1998) further contended that

by the age of four, children can identify themselves by color. Many African American children will start saying they are brown. Some light skin African American children will even identify themselves as yellow or peach. They may even say they are White, if they have a lighter complexion. If you describe them as Black, they will become adamant about their skin color. (p. 16)

Four-year-olds are focused on color words and matching their skin color to the names of colors they are learning. Therefore, they are describing themselves as the color they actually see versus a racial categorization. During this time, teachers and parents need to nurture their desire to see people as individuals (Wright, 1998). Teachers need to understand their own color, racial, and social class biases, as well as how to intervene when children are acting out racial prejudices. Preschool classrooms should be filled with books, toys, pictures, and videos that are representative of different races (Nakazawa, 2003).

In the early elementary grades, kindergarten through second grade, children are growing fast and learning a lot about the world around them. At this age, the child's family is the center of their universe (Nakazawa, 2003). Because the family is a big part of the child's life, as long as the parents do not make an issue about skin color or race, the child would not either. As stated by Wright (1998), when a child is asked, "What are you?" five- and six-year-olds are most likely to reply "a boy" or "a girl," rather than



mentioning color. However, if they do state a skin color, it is a very accurate color. As children in this stage become more aware of skin color and differences in skin color, they become very curious and will start to ask questions and make comments about why their appearance is different from that of his or her mom or dad (Nakazawa, 2003). In order to teach children to be racially healthy, teachers have to remember to avoid talking about people in terms of skin color and race. Teachers and educators need to focus on creating a climate that fosters the healthy identity development of all children by being sensitive to socialization issues (Reid & Henry, 2000).

The next period in a child's life is the middle years, the ages eight to 12 years. This is when children begin to adopt the illogic aspects of adults' color and racial biases and when children are able to associate that racial group versus color defines who they are (Root, 1992). As children learn to identify themselves as Black, they are also learning that this may not be the most positive identity. They begin to realize that racial groups are tied to social status. However, children at this age have a natural tendency to feel positive about themselves, which protects them from some of the negative impact of racism. At this point, these children still spend a considerable amount of time with their family, and this also builds positive self-esteem. However, biracial children will struggle with this stage if their parents expect them to only identify with one of their races (Wright, 1998). Biracial children who understand they are biracial and are accepted as that in their family will have an advantage when they enter adolescence, a time when teenagers are expected or pressured to choose a side. Wright (1998) believed that teachers are seen as the gatekeepers to the American dream. Teachers will either send the message to their students that they are capable and can do well in school, or that they are incapable of

doing the work. Black children are sensitive to their teachers' expectations. If the child believes that their teachers believe in them, they will be more successful.

Students entering sixth grade and up to about eighth grade are in the adolescent years when most biracial teens feel pressured to choose one racial category (Nakazawa, 2003). This is when you see more teenagers splitting into groups based on race. The reason for this is that they prefer to hang out with other people who share similarities related to looks, manners, and living in the same neighborhoods. Again, however, during these years, biracial teens struggle. Gibbs and Hines (1992) maintained that "due to societal pressures, they may feel the pressure to choose a Black identity even though they may prefer to identify as White or mixed" (p. 224). In general, the majority of biracial teens are comfortable with their biracial identity, but struggle with other people defining them racially. When teens enter high school, the experience can be very different. This is the time when Blacks begin to unlearn the stereotypes about his or her own group. They begin to develop a positive self-identity based on their racial group identity (Tatum, 2003).

To promote interracial harmony at the high school level, Wright (1998) recommends that teachers encourage students to treat each other with respect and kindness. Students should also be encouraged to get to know each other in extracurricular activities such as band, cheerleading, and sports teams. Another way to promote interracial harmony is by exposing common myths about the races, conducting discussions on exploitation of racial and ethnic differences in various countries, and teaching students to think critically about information they receive about different races.

Finally, high school teachers need to encourage students to develop strategies to respond to racism.

### **Bi-Ethnic/Biracial Educational Trends**

Lindsey et al. (2006) held that “the education system not only fails to enlighten students and educators about oppression and entitlement, but it further institutionalizes the oppression of dominated cultural groups by its very structure and practice and resistance to change” (p. 84). Students who understand the system of privilege and power are able to navigate the school system compared to students who do not have the access to power. Delpit (1995) clarified that children from middle-class homes tend to do better in school than those from non-middle-class homes because the culture of the school is based on the culture of the upper and middle class of those in power.

One oppressive act the education system employed until the 2010–2011 school year was the “check one box only” policy that had a negative effect on biracial children in schools. As a result, schools have become sites for creating monoracial identities for multiracial children. The invisibility of multiracial children in schools’ racial categorizations policies mirrors a range of their invisibility in school culture (Chiong, 1998).

Cruz-Janzen (1999) interviewed 10 bi-ethnic and biracial people who were 20 to 30 years old about their experiences in mainstreamed schools and how the curriculum affected them. According to the people interviewed, the school’s curriculum encouraged an environment that is ethnically and racially hostile to students of color, particularly students of multiple heritages. However, today many schools try to use a multicultural approach to curriculum, but the multicultural curriculum does not include biracial

students. Most curriculum materials do not include addressing the unique needs of biracial children (Wardle, 1999). In U.S. textbooks, there are no biracial role models. Most historical figures are portrayed as African American.

Educators must continue to learn about and understand the unique needs of biracial students. It is important that students are made to feel that they only can value both sides of their heritage. Training in this area should include: (a) focusing on educators understanding their individual biases, (b) learning how to work effectively with multiracial and multiethnic people, and (c) being knowledgeable about the overlap between minority issues and the unique issues of mixed-race children. Educators must also emphasize individual differences and multiethnic and multiracial heroes. Generally, there needs to be an understanding of the limitations of current multicultural approaches (Wardle, 2000).

Lee (2005) supported scholars who believe the cultural difference/discontinuity problems many children of color face in school are due to cultural differences or mismatches between the students' home culture and the school culture. Many other educators believe that color and culture make no difference, concluding that all people are the same and should be treated accordingly. However, this type of culture blindness can lead students to feel discounted or invisible in school (Lindsey et al., 2006). Schools should try to adopt culturally sensitive pedagogy to accommodate the cultural differences of their students. Without addressing the issues biracial children face, these children may struggle, like other ethnic groups have, with lower achievement, higher dropout rates, and lower social mobility.

## **Summary**

Today, more than ever, it is important in this ever-morphing world to have a deep understanding of biracial children. Not so long ago, these children would have been labeled simply African American. The historical perspective of biracial students as individuals and the models that have been developed to explain the social adjustment of biracial children are all important in order to have a better understanding of the biracial experience.

With the growing number of biracial children, parents, educators, or anyone dealing with children need to have more in-depth research that expands and builds on the studies that have been previously conducted. While there has been much written for parents and teachers on how to raise healthy biracial children, one area that needs to be examined more closely is how parents of biracial children negotiate racial boundaries and how these impact their own child's educational experiences. There have been limited studies on the schooling experiences of Black-White biracial students. As researchers, we need to gain a better understanding of the educational experiences of biracial children and determine whether the challenges encountered by these students have an effect on their achievement. Due to the unique challenges these children face, we need to understand the critical factors that influence the schooling and academic success of Black-White students.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Introduction**

This chapter describes the methodology used in this study of biracial students at different grade levels. This qualitative study focused on exploring the experiences of biracial children through the perceptions of their parents and relied on asking parents, one Black biological parent and one White biological parent, to describe their experiences of their biracial children. This was done through interview questions on issues of racial identity, family dynamics, challenges their children may face, and their educational experiences. These interviews were interpreted through the lens of critical race theory.

#### **Research Questions**

The primary research question that guided this study is: *What can we learn about the school experience of biracial children as seen through the eyes of their parents?*

The secondary research questions that flowed from this primary question and further guided this study are:

- *What are the challenges of raising a biracial child?*
- *What discussions about race do parents of biracial children have with their children?*
- *Does being a biracial child affect a child's identity? If so, how?*
- *How does the school experience of biracial children differ from that of other children?*

The research questions (see Appendix A) were asked in an interview format. The purpose was to interview parents in order to gather information about their unique

circumstances and experiences of raising biracial children. The information gleaned from the participants' personal experiences helped me to gain an expanded understanding of these experiences, and their insights were invaluable.

### **Methodology**

Qualitative research was the chosen study method because it enabled me to hear the voices of parents of biracial children in order to gain a better understanding of the issues these children face. Stake (2010) declared that many qualitative researchers aspire to work with people who are marginalized in society because these studies may illuminate the plight and virtue of the disenfranchised (p. 202).

Merriam (2002) stated that there are several key characteristics that cut across the various interpretive qualitative research designs. The first characteristic is that researchers strive to understand the meaning people have constructed about their world and experiences. The second characteristic is that the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis. Another important characteristic is that the process is inductive; the researchers gather data to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than deductively deriving hypotheses to be tested. Finally, qualitative inquiry is richly descriptive (p. 4). This study drew upon critical race theory, interviewing protocol, and narrative inquiry for its methodology.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory was used to interpret and highlight issues of race and/or racism in the educational setting. Parker and Lynn (2002) defined three main goals for critical race theory. The first goal is to present storytelling and narratives as valid approaches through which to examine race and racism in the law and society. The second

goal is to argue for the eradication of racial subjugation while simultaneously recognizing that race is a social construct. Finally, the third goal is to draw important relationships between race and other axes of domination (p.7).

### **Interviewing**

According to Brenner (2006), “the goal of an ethnographic interview is to understand the shared experiences, practices, and beliefs that arise from shared cultural perspectives” (p. 358). Cognitive anthropologists believe that culture is a cognitive system that can be understood through systematic elicitation of natural language used by people to describe domains of knowledge (Brenner, 2006, p. 358). Brenner (2006) stated that cognitive anthropologists start with an opening question that asks the informant to give a broad description about a particular topic, and that is just the beginning of the interview. This is then followed by a variety of questions that probe deeper into the domains uncovered through the opening question (p. 238).

In this study, the interviews were guided by open-ended questions that allowed the parent participants to create and share their experiences and their stories. The biological parents were asked the interview questions. Stake (2010) asserted that the main purposes of interviews are: (a) to obtain unique information or interpretation held by the person interviewed, (b) to collect a numerical aggregation of information from many persons, and (c) to find out about “a thing” that researchers were unable to observe themselves (p. 95).

### **Narrative Inquiry**

Connelly and Clandinin (2006) explained that “narrative inquiry is how we understand human experience. Humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (p.



477). “The story is a portal through which a person enters the world. It is also the portal through which his or her experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477). “The purpose of narrative inquiry is based on storytelling” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479). Each story told and lived by individuals is situated and understood within larger cultural, social, familial, and institutional narratives (Clandinin, Steeves, & Caine, 2013). Therefore, “narrative inquiry begins with the researcher interviewing participants who tell” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 478). In narrative inquiry, stories are not just a medium of learning, development, or transformation, but also a life (Clandinin et al., 2013).

### **Demographics**

The participants in this study were parents of biracial children who were enrolled in a single public school district in southeastern Wisconsin. At the time of this study, this district educated approximately 22, 474 students each year. Out of the total number of students, Black students accounted for approximately 15.2% or approximately 3,416 students, while White students accounted for approximately 51.9% or approximately 11, 664 students. Students who identified with two or more races consisted of 4.4% of the student body or 988 students, and 51.63% were considered to be economically disadvantaged. It was the third largest district in the state. The district had 23 elementary schools, five middle schools, three high schools, four charter schools, three choice schools, one specialty school, and one Head Start child development center.

Interviews were conducted with three sets of parents and two separate individual parents. In two of the families, the biological parents consisted of a White biological parent and a Black biological parent. All the participants had or previously had a biracial

child enrolled and attending this southeastern school district. The participants were recruited through networking channels (e.g., word of mouth and referrals from people who were aware of the research study).

### **Data Collection**

The interviews began in the spring 2016. Individual interviews were conducted with the three sets of parents and two individual parents. The interviews took place in a private environment that was a convenient place for the participants, such as the homes of the participants, the schools, or an agreed upon meeting place. The process began with the researcher explaining the purpose of the study; this was followed by the researcher answering any questions the participants might have had. If more clarification was needed, a second interview was scheduled. The first interview took between 40 and 60 minutes. During the interviews, the participants were asked a series of semi-structured and open-ended questions in an effort to collect data.

The participants were allowed to freely discuss their experiences. The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed for the purpose of analysis. The questions parents were asked dealt with their experiences raising a biracial child, the challenges they faced at school and in the community while raising their biracial child, and any recommendations they might have for schools. During the interviews, the researcher used listening skills and clarification techniques to facilitate the discussion.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher's notes were numbered in the order that the interviews took place. Next, the audiotapes were listened to so as to familiarize the researcher with the information. Next, the audiotapes were transcribed verbatim. Each transcript was

assigned a number according to the order of the interviews. The interviews were listened to a third time in order to cross-check the information and verify that the information was correctly and accurately transcribed. The participants were then given a copy of the transcript to ensure it was exact and factual. After the transcripts were verified, the information was coded for common themes. The themes were used to categorize the information. The evidence was triangulated during this process. This was done when the transcripts were viewed a number of times to ensure their accuracy and also when a question arose. Stake (2010) explained that triangulation occurs when the researcher looks and listens from more than one vantage point (p. 123).

### **Limitations**

The scope of this study, as is true in all studies, is limited; consequently, the ability to generalize its findings is limited. However, the findings in this study can be built upon with future research. This study was limited by the socioeconomic status of the participants, the geographic location, the school district, the age range of the children, and the racial composition of the parent participants.

All of the participants were socioeconomically from the middle class. Perhaps participants from the upper or lower class would communicate experiences that are very different. The participants all lived within the same geographic location. This is a limitation in so far as the study only represents families who live in a suburban community, thus limiting access to the experiences of families residing in a metropolitan community or a rural community. The participants' children attended schools within the same school district, whereas parent experiences across a variety of school districts may provide different data. District policies and procedures as well as teacher practices may

vary widely from district to district, thereby influencing in a variety of ways, the parent feedback regarding how the school impacts biracial children. The age of the participants' children in this study ranged from middle school age to adulthood. This age range covers a wide span of developmental time. It was beyond the scope of this study to go into further depth on child development and identity formation; however, a future study that focuses specifically on child development theory and biracial children in their high school years, a critical time in identity formation, would be an informative research contribution to this topic. Additionally, three of the male participants in this study were African American and one was Hispanic, and all of the female participants were Caucasian. The findings of this study may have been different if all the women had been African American and the men had been Caucasian. It would be beneficial if a future study explored parental roles and the impact of parental race, gender, and ethnicity has on perceptions of raising biracial children.

### **Researcher's Perspective**

My personal experiences in raising my own biracial children provided the motivation for me to seek more knowledge regarding the topic of biracial children's parents' experiences. After studying cultural competency, I wanted to understand more about children's educational experiences and about how racism affects biracial children.

In doing this type of research, the life experiences I brought to the research helped with the interpretation of the data and the results from the study because of the background knowledge I had with biracial children. However, regarding the topic, I had to ensure that my beliefs did not interfere with the unbiased analysis and reporting of the

data. As the researcher, I used semi-structured interview questions so as to make sure not to suggest or lead the participants into answering the questions in a particular way.

### **Ethical Issues**

Ethical issues may arise when researchers are completing a study that deals with race and educational issues. At the beginning of the research project, each participant was referred to by a pseudonym on the audiotapes and the written transcripts. Prior to the beginning of the study, each participant was given a consent form (see Appendix B) to sign that described the purpose of the study, confidentiality, and the right to discontinue participation in the study at any time. Also, each participant had the opportunity to review the findings of this study upon its completion. In addition, the National Louis University Institution Research and Review Board approved the application for study.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to better understand the culture and the lives of biracial students. By conducting ethnographic interviews, the researcher was able to understand the experiences, practices, and beliefs that arose from the perspectives of the biracial students' parents. The researcher was also able to gain a sense of what it is like to raise a biracial child in today's world heard through the voices of three sets of parent couples, one single father, and one mother. Through analyzing the interview transcripts, the researcher sought to answer the question: What can we learn about the school experience of biracial children as seen through the eyes of their parents?

The participant interviews were conducted with three married biracial couples, one African American father who was single but formally married to a Caucasian woman, and one female who was an Italian Caucasian married to an African American male who chose not to participate. With two of the biracial couples, the wives were Caucasian and the husbands were African American. With the third couple, the wife was Caucasian and the husband was Hispanic.

#### **Participant Biographies**

The participants in this study were four mothers and four fathers who had children aged 12 years to adulthood. All of the mothers in the study were Caucasian. Three of the fathers were African American, and one of the fathers was Hispanic. All of the parents sent their children to schools within the same school district. All of the mothers and fathers were working, middle-class people. The participants viewed their children as being biracial, meaning part Caucasian and part African American. The names of the

participants and their children were changed to pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality. Additional information about the mothers, fathers, and their families is presented to better familiarize the reader with some background on each parent participant at the time of this study.

### **Andy**

Andy, the single father, had part-time custody of his daughter. He shared custody with his daughter's mother. Andy was African American and his daughter's mother was Caucasian. Andy had just recently earned his college degree. His daughter was biracial and was attending middle school.

### **Jane**

Jane was an Italian Caucasian mother who was married to an African American male. Jane was a college graduate. Her husband did not want to be interviewed or participate in the study because he felt like he deals with racism all the time and would not be able to add a lot of information to the study. Jane and her husband had two biracial daughters, Kim and Sue. One of the daughters was in middle school and the other daughter was in high school. They moved to the area when one of their daughters was in late elementary school and the other daughter was in middle school.

### **The Williams Family**

The Williams family consisted of a mother, a father, and two sons. The mother, Ericka, was Caucasian and grew up in a community that had little diversity. The father, Will, was African American. Both, the mother and the father were college graduates. Ericka and Will had two sons, Mike and Tyler. Both of their sons went to kindergarten

through high school within the same school district. At the time of this study, both of their sons had graduated from college.

### **The Walton Family**

The Walton family consisted of a mother, a father, and two sons. The mother, Nancy, was Caucasian and grew up in a rural community. The father, Matt, was African American and grew up in a big city. Nancy and Will both graduated from college. One son was named Marc, and the other son was named Kevin. Both of Nancy and Matt's sons were in high school and had been enrolled in the same school district since kindergarten.

### **The Johnson Family**

The Johnson family consisted of a mother and a father and four children. The mother, Mary, was Caucasian and a college graduate. Rodney, the biological father of the children, was African American. They were married for a time but got divorced. When the children were young, Rodney passed away. Mary, the mother, then remarried. The stepfather, Ray, was a Hispanic male who had been the father figure since the youngest child was a toddler. Mary and Ray had two biracial girls, Kate and Kayla, and biracial twin boys, David and Dustin. All of the children were post-high school. The youngest girl, Kayla, was attending college as a freshman. The older girl, Kate, moved out of the home and was working. One of the twin boys was in his last year of college, and the other boy was living at home and working a full-time job.

### **Interview Themes**

In an effort to uncover the emerging themes from the interviews of the participants, the transcripts were coded using the phenomenological approach. Four



major themes were discovered that applied to all of the participants. Each of the themes are presented verbatim from participants' interviews so as to demonstrate the richness of each theme. The following four major themes emerged from the interviews.

- The disconnect between home and school cultures
- Exposure to different cultures and groups of people
- Preparing for racism
- Being open and honest

### **Theme 1: The Disconnect Between Home and School Cultures**

The first theme that arose was that sometimes there is a disconnect between the student's home culture and the school culture.

One day after school, Mary Johnson was talking to her two sons. They were twins who were in kindergarten. During their discussion, her sons revealed to her that they were being teased at school. Mary asked one of the twins why the other students were teasing the two of them. He stated that they were being teased about their curly hair and why the bridge of their nose was so wide. According to Mary Johnson, the boys were going to an almost all-White school where children attending there did not have a lot of exposure to children who were of mixed race. Being open and honest with her sons, she explained to them that the other students had rarely seen anyone who looked differently from them and were not quite sure how react to them. Mary decided the best way to handle this situation was to talk to her sons with open and honest communication.

The Williams family handled a similar situation differently. Ericka Williams had taken her biracial sons on an interesting tour of an elementary school. When they got home, Will, their father, asked the boys how the tour went. They replied, "Dad, it was

like they have never seen Black people before.” Will Williams said, “Oh, Okay. Do you want to go there?” The boys answered, “No.” Will was proud of how his sons handled this because the boys had voiced their opinion on how other children saw them.

Ray and Mary Johnson’s twin boys also had an experience in middle school with their peer group; the peer group thought Ray and Mary Johnson’s boys did not know what race they were. Ray Johnson, a Hispanic father, would give his children a ride to and from school on a daily basis. Other students would see Ray Johnson around at school activities. Mary Johnson described an incident that reflected the thinking of the peer group:

One day in class, they had an activity that they were doing on race for social studies class. The kids were all split up by their race and the boys went to sit with the African American kids and the Hispanics were like, “What are you doing over there? You don’t belong over there. You’re supposed to be over here.” The boys were like, “No, we are over here”, and Hispanics were like, “No you’re not. You’re Hispanic; get over here. We know who your parents are.” The boys stated, “No, that’s my stepdad; my real dad is Black.”

Ray and Mary Johnson would have conversations with their children about how they were different and that other students are not always exposed to differences like their children were. However, according to Mary, the twin boys were still surprised because it was the first time the boys were kind of like, “Wow, I guess we are so light.” Mary Johnson shared her thoughts regarding this discovery:

People weren’t necessarily looking at the facial features or the hair or any of those other distinguishing features. It was just the skin color itself and assumed since they’ve seen Ray and he’s Hispanic, so the boys had to be Hispanic.

Jane took a very different approach when her daughter was assigned a project during Black History Month. Jane had always hated February because it forced the girls to pick one side of their culture and not their whole being. According to Jane, her

daughter Mia was in the second or third grade. She was assigned a project to do on her heritage/culture. The students were supposed to pick one of their heritage/culture and design a project that highlighted it. After hearing about the assignment, Jane decided that she needed to visit the school to talk to the teacher. Because her daughter was biracial, Jane told the teacher that she felt it was inappropriate to have her daughter pick just one heritage/culture for her project. Jane also told the teacher that she felt there were real implications for what this meant based on forming her daughter's identity.

Moore (2006) stated that biracial children who learn from their parents that they do not have to accept one race over another are better prepared to deal with the pressures from society. After speaking with Jane, the teacher agreed, and Mia, Jane's daughter, was able to do a project based on both of her heritages/cultures. Jane described the project:

She made a "combo doll" for her project, which consisted of a doll dressed in a dashiki with curly hair just like Mia's hair. Then she had the doll carrying a Gucci purse and wearing Gucci shoes. It was a perfect combination of both, including having flags of both heritages and the written report talking about both places. It worked beautifully.

Jane's recounted experience seems to reinforce Lee's (2005) assertion that culture difference/discontinuity scholars believe the problems many children of color face in school are due to cultural differences between the student's home culture and the school culture.

Another example of culture differences and a disconnect between the student's home culture and the school was Ericka and Will William's son Tyler's experience, as noted in the following interview excerpt.

Interviewer: Right, but other than that?

Ericka: If you know our kids, I mean they are complete opposites. Tyler is more of a free spirit.

Will: I mean a free spirit in the standpoint of friends. Not free in, I mean he didn't, the school that he was at had issues with Tyler because he wouldn't talk to the adults. And they had said to us that they felt like, sometimes, he was disrespectful because he wouldn't say anything. And I said, well, do you go out of your way to speak to him? And they said, no. I said well what's the problem? You don't make an appearance, and you don't make it seem like you want to talk to him. So I said, I'm fine with what my son is doing; he is not disrespecting you; and he is not yelling at you; he is not being disruptive in your class. I said, "I'm fine.

Interviewer: Right

Will: I mean that has been his temperament all the way through.

Interviewer: Hmm. Hmm.

Will: When he went to college, his coaches sat down and had a conference with him. And they asked him; man do you want to play? Tyler was like yeah. They said, so you have to act like it. And then they figured him out and everything was fine. But the thing was he didn't feel like he needed to say anything to you so he wouldn't. And I respect that because if I don't want to say anything to you, I'm not going to say anything to you either.

Many of the families felt like they had a great school experience with wonderful teachers and believed that other students, teachers, coaches, and others in their city were very accepting of interracial people. All the parent participants felt it was important for their children to attend schools where there were other interracial students, and the best way to deal with the perceived disconnect between the student's home and school culture was to have discussions about it. The parents believed that if they would discuss race with their children and how they are part of both races, it helped their children develop their own sense of positive identity.

## **Theme 2: Exposure To Different Cultures and Groups of People**

The second theme that emerged was that the parents who were interviewed felt that they needed to raise their children by exposing them to all groups of people.

O'Donoghue (2005) interviewed 11 White mothers of biracial adolescents to determine whether and how these mothers socialized their children in the areas of race and ethnicity. Each woman in the study choose a geographical community that she considered was the most hospitable for the racial composition of her family.

When Jane's children were first born, they lived in an extremely ethnically and economically diverse community. Jane elaborated on the decision making that went into choosing a community in which to live:

We chose this area to live in because I didn't want to live in a white bread, fancy pants neighborhood, like I did when I was little. I wanted to live with real people. I wanted to make sure that my children were not the only biracial children in the school they would be attending. Once my children started there, we would jokingly say it is a little United Nations. My children attended a school that had a lot of East Asians, Indians, Latinos, Puerto Ricans, African American, and White. It was so racial integrated my children didn't even realize that they were different until third or fourth grade.

When relocating, Jane, like the women in O'Donoghue's (2005) study, wanted to choose a geographical location that would be good for her family: "When we had to move, I researched the heck out of the neighbors and the schools. I wanted to ensure there was diversity around us."

Jane also noted that the school her daughter Kim attended tried to give a group of African American girls an opportunity to see women of color in strong roles and not ones that they were used to seeing. However, Jane explained why this opportunity was initially difficult for her to consent to:

I couldn't participate at all; I was not welcome. Not because I was White, but because they wanted to give the girls this opportunity. It was very painful for me to hear. I always participated in everything. The school basically said we are going to teach her this piece. I did let her go. It was a great opportunity. She appreciated the sorority feel and the positivity, pushing each other and stuff. It was good for her and they had a whole ceremony. It was wonderful. It exposed her to different people.

Matt and Nancy Walton also felt it was important for their boys to be surrounded by different cultures. According to Nancy, their sons were exposed to an extensive mixture of multi-cultural family and friends.

We have raised the boys around both families, so race has never been an issue for our children. Matt stated that his family is very multi-integrated; Hispanic, Siberian, and . . . We are just one big happy family, so our boys don't know any differently.

Matt and Nancy Walton indicated that the schools their boys attended were also integrated. Matt commented on the difference between Chicago and Wisconsin in terms of segregation:

Wisconsin is very different from Chicago. Chicago is segregated, very segregated. And you wouldn't think that, but it is. It is different here in Wisconsin than in Chicago, because they will tell you, I know you are mixed. Where we live now in Wisconsin, nobody really cares. The city we live in now is very open to interracial. Growing up in Chicago, you just didn't see it.

According to Nakazawa (2003), when multicultural children are able to see themselves reflected in their own community, they have a broader array of positive multiracial role models, a greater comfort level with their own identity, and a strong internalized sense that it's okay to be racially different. Will and Ericka Williams also echoed the feelings of other participants that raising children around many different people was important. To promote interracial harmony at the high school level, Wright (1998) recommended that students get to know each other in extracurricular activities such as band, cheerleading, and sports teams. Will Williams detailed his thoughts on the benefits of extracurricular activities:

That we were so busy with activities and stuff that in it exposed the boys to many different people. It was more about being exposed to as many different people as you can be. We did that. It was easy to do because the kids [who] played in the band were different than the kids that played football were different than the kids

that played soccer. You have different mixes in community activities that they did like wrestling, working at the homeless shelter, mission trips, and singing in church. We just exposed them to many different people.

Wright (1998) noted that the biracial children from households that self-describe as having “mixed” or biracial children do not over identify with their Black or White heritage. Ericka Williams agreed with her husband Will that raising their children around many different people was important:

From the time the boys were born, they attended an all-White elderly church. They grew up in that culture, that atmosphere. . . . We couldn’t have written the script any better from the standpoint for all the different players that were involved. You know, players that were involved with the boys, and it was not just the men, it was the women too. It is not just Black or not just White, but it has been a collage of, just you know, good people.

Will Williams further elaborated on how important it was that his children were raised in a community where they were accepted for who they are:

You know their friends’ parents who were treating them like they were their own kids. And I mean, I can’t complain about the life my sons have had so far, or how they have been raised, or where they have been raised. I don’t believe they would have had the same experience if they were raised somewhere else. So the community has allowed them to be who they are based on the adults that we’ve surrounded them with.

Another aspect of raising her children, according to Mary Johnson, was the importance of multi-racial friends. Johnson (2004) posited that it is also important for biracial children to be surrounded by different cultures in their schools. In that vein, Mary Johnson chose a school where her children could identify with other students through race, religion, and social economic:

The group of friends that they had was so racially mixed. Their best friend, John, is Pilipino. They had White and Black friends and Hispanic friends that all hung around. The schools that the girls went to were very diverse. That’s all they really knew.

The following interview excerpt documents that Mary and Ray Johnson also felt it was important for their children to have multi-racial friends.

Interviewer: How did high school go for them? Did anybody have any problems at high school?

Mary: Nothing to my knowledge.

Interviewer: Nothing for the girls either?

Mary: Well that's what I'm trying to think of.

Ray: Which one of the boys said that someone called them the N-word?

Mary: Yeah, somebody said something.

Ray: That was just one time.

Interviewer: Did they say anything back?

Ray: They were taken aback by what he said because they had never experienced anything like that at this point in time.

Mary: The group of friends that they had was so racially mixed. Their best friend, Jack, is Pilipino. They had White and Black friends and Hispanic friends that all hung around. They were in the biotech academy, so it was the higher academic academy and so you had that nice blend of those extremely intelligent students

Interviewer: They just brought it up at home because they thought it was weird or strange?

Mary: Yes.

Ray: Yeah. It's the first time for them to feel this race thing.

Mary: It was kind of like, "You're not going to guess what happened to us at school today."

Ray: Like she said, they had so many different races as friends and they never had to deal with that.

Mary Johnson also noted the importance of her children being raised with many different experiences from both sides of their family:



I took the children to church, and they've all been baptized. I took them to Baptist churches, Catholic masses or services, funerals and stuff for Rodney's side of the family. I haven't hid that from them. We've brought the kids up educating them on all the different races and all the different religions and everything that's out there.

Tatum (2003) stated that children who are biracial with Black heritage need to have positive ties to a Black community, otherwise it will be difficult for that child to value both sides of his or her heritage. For all of the participant parents, it was important to expose their children to different cultures and different groups of people. The families did this in different ways. Most of the families had their children enrolled in integrated schools, and they would also expose their children to both sides of the extended family.

### **Theme 3: Preparing for Racism**

The third theme that emerged from the parent interview data was the need to prepare their biracial child for racism. This affirms the research of Kerwin et al. (1993) who found that the parents of biracial children felt it was necessary to prepare their child for racism. Kerwin et al. (1993) also reported that the Black parent of a biracial child tended to be more conscious and aware of discrimination than their White spouses. These two findings were echoed in this research. Andy, the single father of a biracial daughter, offered his opinion as a Black father:

I always told her we are all equal, but she is both Black and White. She is no different than anyone else. I do look at her when I see her; I do see her, view her, as an African American. I think she should think that way.

A different scenario where a family had to deal with racism is when Marc Walton came home and told his mom, Nancy Walton, why his friend, Sarah, could not come over to their house anymore. Marc reported that Sarah's mom told her that she didn't want her daughter hanging around Black trash. Nancy admitted her angry reaction:

I responded poorly because I said they are White trash. I shouldn't have said that. I was angry because it was my kid, not a bad person. And she was saying you're a bad person. I have to understand that my boys are going to run into people like that.

Nancy Walton felt that her husband Matt Walton should take the lead on this since he had more experience with this kind of discrimination. O'Donoghue's (2005) study found that all the mothers in that study felt that the presence of an African American partner was very vital to the process because their husbands had knowledge of ethnicity. In this regard, Matt Walton posited being smart and having restraint as effective ways of handling racism:

You have to explain to your children that they have to be smart. When people say things, they are trying to get under your skin. You have to turn it around and be smart. So if being sarcastic a little is going to make you smarter, then do it. If someone says something racial to me, instead of just going off the handle, the first thing I am going to do is ask "What's your point?"

Matt Walton continued to express his thoughts about what he does when he encounters racism. When encountering racism, you are put in the difficult situation of trying to figure out how to handle it. Everyone responds differently. Wright (1998) noted that there are constructive ways to handle racism. Some constructive ways to handle racism include: ignoring it, preparing a clever comeback, defusing the situation with a clever response, or using humor. Matt always tried to handle it by asking questions in an effort to defuse the situation and to turn the attention back on the person who is making racist comments or jokes:

Matt: If someone says something racial to me, instead of just going off the handle, the first thing I am going to ask is "So what's your point"?

Nancy: Right

Matt: 'Cause seriously, I want to know because I am going to laugh with you. So tell me or explain to me what is your point because when you do that, do

that to them, it brings them down. They can't answer the question and now the people around them are looking at them like you can't answer the question. You want to talk this talk but you can't understand the talk.

Matt Walton stressed that this is what he tells his sons to do if they have to deal with someone who is being racist or saying derogatory comments. Matt Walton teaching his sons how to be smart when dealing with racism was his way of demonstrating and modeling how to accept themselves as biracial individuals. According to Nakazawa (2003),

if we want our children to develop antiracist thinking and behavior, we have to guide them. We can't protect our children from the reality of bigotry, prejudice and racism, but we can make certain they don't buy into any racial attitudes. (p. 109)

Matt Walton emphasized that he is teaching his sons how to deal with racism: "I always tell my boys be smart, use your brain versus your anger." Matt also acknowledged that he knows his boys are going to experience discrimination: "I tell my boys to watch their back; don't trust people; and that is in general, period."

Ray Johnson, the Hispanic father, reflected on his experiences of growing up: "I grew up in the 1960s and 1970s and went through all of it. I can spot racism." According to Ray, his wife Mary is very naïve. Mary Johnson admitted that she is naïve when it comes to racism. She does not look at it the same way that her husband Ray does. Mary Johnson stated that when she was out with the four children and people would look at her, she thought they were just looking because she had the twin stroller. She had two kids in the stroller and two kids hanging on the side of the stroller. She thought they were looking at her because she had all these babies, and she was trying to manage all of this while grocery shopping or whatever. In contrast, Ray Johnson stated that "you guys are White so you don't experience it."

Many White parents of biracial children have never experienced racism before entering into a biracial relationship. Sometimes, White people have a difficult time understanding racism because they do not experience it in their daily lives. Ray Johnson also explained that he felt that he tended to be more conscious and aware of discrimination than his White spouse, as evidenced in the following interview exchange:

Interviewer: It's interesting because when we worked for Ernie, a Hispanic leader, I was the same way though. One of the parents came in and he was yelling because we were going to suspend his kid or something and the parents' like, "You People," and it never even occurred to me and then the parents walked out and Ernie was like, "do you know how racist they were"? I'm like, "what"? It went right over my head.

Ray: Because

Mary: Part of it's because you've never experience this.

Ray: You guys are White and you haven't. When you're a different color . . .

Interviewer: You experience it every day.

Ray: You definitely will experience it

Mary: You're more aware of it, more conscious of it. I'm just saying, nowadays, you're more conscious of it than what I would be honey, that's all I'm saying.

Mary Johnson noted that she had conversations with her children about how they have to be careful because there are people out there who are racist. As much as we would like to think that it is not a problem, it is a problem. According to Mary, "not everyone thinks the way we do." As can be seen, all the parent participants handled these situations differently. Each family has to handle the situations as they feel is best for themselves and their families. Ray Johnson drew upon his personal Mexican history to guide his children

That her and me were kind of different because I already know what it was to be in a rougher time because of my younger life. I did not want them to go through that, so I was harder on them as far as keeping themselves focused. As far as Mexican guys, family would not allow kids to overstep the boundaries. I ensured that I kept them in line. For any reason, I did not want them to go through what I went through. I was going to do whatever we needed to do to make sure that they kept their heads on straight.

Mary Johnson also noted that her daughter has experienced racism based on the assumption her daughter was Hispanic. Mary recounted what happened when her daughter got a job at a Mexican restaurant when she was sixteen:

Hispanics come in and they expect her to speak Spanish because she looks Hispanic, and she's working at a Mexican restaurant. There's been a few times she comes home and she goes, "I can't believe they don't leave me a tip just because I can't speak Spanish."

According to Mary's daughter, the hardest thing for her was the fact that she does not look biracial:

This little boy, he used to tease me. He used to call me a little "Mexican girl." People don't believe that I am mixed. They think you're Mexican. If I tell them "No," then they think I'm Dominican or Puerto Rican, They never think that I'm biracial and when I do say I am, they say, "Oh, that's not true."

Jane felt that the hardest part for her children was when they were younger: "People would ask them all the time if they were adopted. I got so mad, at some point, that's when I started answering to people, 'Nope, came out of my vagina; they're mine.' I didn't even care." Jane also shared some thoughts about her husband as well as her struggle concerning her children not embracing their Italian heritage:

They [people] don't understand that he is extremely pro-Black and he is very much part of the community and very culturally Black and all those different things. He grew up very culturally Black. They don't expect it of him, and they don't necessarily expect it of the girls. I really struggled with this when they were little because my identity is so wrapped up in being Italian that it's really hard because they didn't see themselves that way.

Jane did not realize that the world would see her children as African American until she had a conversation with her father-in-law:

He was explaining to me that the world is going to see them as Black women and they need to be prepared for that. I was like, “No”; the world will see them as bi-racial. He’s like, “Sweetheart, no they won’t.” It wasn’t until we started getting older that I started noticing it, and I was like they need to be prepared for what this is going to be like. We have never shied away from having conversations around race, never.

Will and Ericka Williams had a teachable moment about racism with their son, Tyler Williams, when he was in high school, and Will described the moment:

Tyler had to work hard in school. And we had to push him harder, you know, to do well in school. You know, he was capable, but he wanted to be outside with his friends instead of doing work. Tyler was saying, “You know, dad, this teacher is saying that I am not turning stuff in, but I am.” I always told the boys that I am going to believe the teacher first.

One day, Will Williams decided to pick his son Tyler Williams up after school because his son wanted to stay late to get some work done. The following situation was witnessed by Will:

I went in the class to pick him up and I saw Tyler put the paperwork on the guy’s desk. Then Tyler said, “I am about to leave.” The guy said, “You didn’t turn the stuff in.” Tyler said, “Yes, I did.” He said, “No, you didn’t.” Tyler said, “I put it on your desk like you told me to.” And I just told Tyler, loud enough for the teacher to hear, “I got you. Don’t worry about it again. Let’s go.”

According to Will Williams, ironically, the same teacher had the same issues with his other son, Mike Williams: “Mike’s friend said, ‘Mike is the smoothest, coolest, mellowest kid, and this teacher was on him.’ Mike was our intellectual child that had to get straight As. This was a learning experience for both of our sons.” Wright (1998) found that teachers are seen as the gatekeepers to the American dream. Teachers will either send the message to their students that they are capable and can do well in school,

or that they are incapable of doing the work. Black children are sensitive to their teachers' expectations.

Another incident involving Tyler Williams occurred that was also very interesting. According to Ericka Williams, there was a Facebook incident and things got pretty heated:

The boys had Facebook. I was on their page monitoring it and saw a post which concerned me. It was somebody Tyler didn't even know, who posted something about wanting to kill his stepdad. Of course, I questioned Tyler about it. I thought this was concerning, so I called the police.

Ericka Williams thought that by calling the police, the police would be able to help the situation; but as she described what transpired, this proved not to be the case:

The police came over. The two White officers started to question Tyler. Tyler was like, "I don't know this person, and I don't know anything about this." One of the police officers left while the other one came into the house, really laying into Tyler. He was saying, "You know, you lied to me. I'm going to confiscate your computer." The police officer wasn't being nice at all, and then my husband got upset. The situation got heated, so all I could envision was White cop, Black man, and you know where this is going to end up. My husband asked him to leave and in the end, the cop ended up apologizing.

Ericka Williams realized that by calling the police and now having the police at her home created an uncomfortable situation there:

This was a valuable lesson because Will doesn't want his kids to be submissive. The police officer didn't know Tyler as a church going person, with good grades, and a star athlete, and didn't know anything. My thinking is he just saw Tyler as a Black kid.

Another family noted that their son was called the N-word in high school, and according to Nancy Walton, Matt Walton, her husband, actually took over on this one. Nakazawa (2003) cautioned that "multiracial children may hear more disturbing racist remarks about their heritage of color than monoracial children hear because they are considered exceptions" (p. 186). Nancy Walton detailed how her husband Matt taught

their son how to deal with the hard reality of racist name calling: “Matt Walton explained to him, you’re going to hear this. And it’s not right and it’s not something you should physically react to every time or you’ll be in jail. So you have to just kind of walk away.” Matt then chimed in: “We tell them, basically, watch your back; don’t trust people; and that is in general, period. It has nothing to do with color. General, period. But they are looked at differently.” Matt stated that his thing is to “tell them the truth. We don’t lie to them. We talk to them about everything.” As if to underscore the importance of honest communication, Nancy Walton added: “We talk to them about stuff that would stop your heart.”

Kerwin et al. (1993) found that many parents expressed concern about racial discrimination. Black parents reported that they tend to be more conscious and aware of discrimination than their White spouses, and the Black parent also identified a need to more actively prepare their child or children to deal with racism and prejudice. Andy, a single Black father, shared his views about raising a biracial daughter and racism. Andy felt that parents have to address issues of racism as they arise:

Obviously, there are those issues out there. And guess we just have to address them as they come. I was, literally, raised with an Italian American family. My daughter is obviously biracial. We just look at everybody as equal. Some kids were raised differently, to view people differently. However or wherever they get those thoughts from, it is still there.

As Andy noted, racism can be found in all walks of life. In this vein, Andy remarked that today it is difficult to tell who is racist and who is not. This remark precipitated mutual reflection on the fact that sometimes you might be talking to a neighbor or a teacher and they say something that is racist; it is somewhat shocking because you really had no idea how they felt until you spent time talking to them. This racism could even come from



tweets or comments from the president of the United States. The interviewer shared with Andy that it is so different because it is not like these people are waving a confederate flag in their yard, so you really have no idea until you start to get to know someone. It is underground until it rears its ugly head. Andy's assessment of racism in the future was not optimistic:

We are going to continue to have these problems in this country. It is always going to be a problem. Even at the upper level, you can be rich or poor. It doesn't make a difference. We just have seen it with the NBA owner.

Wright (1998) advocated that “if you want to raise children who are not prejudiced against Blacks, Whites, or anyone of a different race, you must avoid using racial epithets or allowing others to do so in your children's presence.” (p. 41). Wright's advice is similar to, Andy's advice regarding raising a biracial child:

Raise your family to love all people. Not all races are bad, not all people were born or taught certain things, or to believe that a certain race is bad. We make a little progress, then something happens and then we go backwards. Until we can weed out the old generations of hateful people in the world, it is not going to change. I hope we can.

Nakazawa asserted that “it is critical that, as we prepare our children for the reality of living in an overtly race-conscious world, we also instill in them an intrinsic faith in others—to assume the best about people” (p. 105). Many of the parent participants knew that their biracial child is going to be viewed by society as African American. They understood that their child is going to have to deal with racism within their lives. Most of the parents discussed with their children that they have to be smart and careful. They wanted to express to their children that they should always know their surroundings and never to forget what they look like. Also, the parents felt that the best way to deal with racism is to address racism as it comes up.

#### **Theme 4: Being Open and Honest**

The last theme that emerged from the data was that the parents felt they needed to have open and honest communication with their children. Many of the parents felt that they needed to be there when their biracial child had a question. The parents wanted to ensure that their children would come to them first to ask a question before asking anyone else. Many parents cultivated that type of relationship. According to Wright (1998), in order for parents to raise a healthy teen, the parents need to be available for the biracial teen. The biracial teen needs to know that each day the parent will be available to listen and talk to them. In this regard, Mary Johnson highlighted the importance of children feeling safe

I think because we've always been open, and we want our kids to be able to experience different things and feel safe, feel like this is a safe place to be able to do that and share those experiences, I think has been huge. We haven't sheltered them from that and encouraged them to learn about the different cultures.

Mary also reiterated that people are still going to look at you differently sometimes.

Mary and Ray Johnson have had several conversations about race with their children. When the children were younger, it was more about them and the way they were being treated or looked at. As the kids got older, they still continued to have conversations about race. Then, according to Mary Johnson, as they get even older, it's still about how they're going to get treated, but the conversations changed to focus on serious relationships and marriage:

We talk to our kids about when you start getting serious with someone, or you are in a serious relationship with someone, they need to understand that you can still have a Black baby. You need to have this conversation with somebody before you get married. If you're really serious with someone and you're going to get married and you're planning on having kids, you need to bring this up because that may be a big issue.

Ray Johnson acknowledged that today, there is still racism in the world but it is different:

People that are colored are not racist. They probably don't like it, because they had been dealing with it for all their lives. That racism is all underground and it's all the stuff that's been happening. It's all coming up.

When asked about open and honest communication, Jane reflected on when she was in college. She had a friend who was also inter-racially married. Jane knew her own experiences were not as difficult because she had a darker skin tone due to her Italian heritage. Jane knew it was going to be harder for them because her friend was blond-haired and blue eyed and White. As they continued talking, the conversation led to a blowout argument that ended their friendship. The argument was over how to raise biracial children. Jane believed that being honest about being biracial was the best way to parent; however, her friend thought otherwise. Jane remembered that painful disagreement:

My friend had a child about year and a half after Mia was born. They were very Christian. She said, "Absolutely not, I will not teach my child to see race." I said, "Well, you're a fool because the world will see them that way. They will see them as a Black person." She's like, "No, I'm going to teach my children that they're Christians and nothing else matters." I said, "You're a fool because the world will treat them as Black people and they need to be prepared for what that means." It ended our friendship because we had such a diabolical, totally opposite view.

Jane felt that it is necessary to speak openly and honestly to biracial children early on about racial differences. They will soon realize that most parents are usually one color, but their parents are different colors, so you need to talk about that difference. Jane's beliefs are evident in her recommendation:

Interviewer: What recommendations do you have that would contribute to the experiences that would help other biracial children to be successful?

Jane: I think it's really important that when they're little that you speak to them from a very young age about their heritage and their background. They're

going to see really fast that most daddy's and mommy's are one color and talk about how we have different mommy's and daddy's.

Nakazawa (2003) cautioned that when a child asks a question, especially about race, parents and others should not shy away from it or ignore it. The best way to handle it, Nakazawa (2003) advised, is to "provide answers that are simple, specific and truthful. Tailor our explanations to the question our child has asked and tailor it to their comprehension level" (p. 34). Jane articulated her thoughts on the issue of questions:

Don't ever squash a question, if your kid has a question answer it and answer it as neutrally as possible. Understand it from their developmental level; don't understand it from a historical perspective. The other thing is to be able to answer any question, to be okay with anything, and then teach them to be proud of whom they are. In every instance that you have the opportunity to do it, teach them what their heritage is; teach them the pros and cons; and teach them what this means for them now.

As noted by Nakazawa (2003), "this type of ongoing, open discussion policy that brings racial differences into an accepting forum for questioning, observation, and conversation, and as a result differences become increasingly unimportant" (p. 38). Wright (1998) observed that biracial children from homes that describe themselves as "mixed" or biracial do not over identify with their Black or White heritage.

Another interesting incident occurred when Jane and her family had discussions when President Obama won the Presidential election. They were in Chicago and Jane described this election as a huge deal because of the teaching moment it presented:

We made a huge deal out of it. The girls were questioning the fact that he was biracial, but everybody was calling him a Black man. That was interesting to the girls. They're like, "But his mom is White." I'm like, "I know," and my husband went through and explained the history of the 1% rule and one drop and whatever else.

Baxley (2008) maintained that biracial identities potentially disrupt the “white of color” dichotomy, and thus call into question the assumptions on which racial inequality is based. Society has a difficult time acknowledging this section of the population.

When Andy was asked to recall any incidents or experiences involving race or racially identity that had an effect on his child’s development, he replied:

Not yet. No, we are open. We have a pretty open relationship where we can talk about anything. It has been this way for quite some time. Every time we meet each other, I always ask her is there something we need to discuss whether it is good or bad.

Andy further stated that he would like his daughter to show respect but also to voice her opinion: “I give her the right, if something is not okay in her heart, to speak up. That is just something I want her to do.”

All the parent participants felt it was important to have open and honest communication with their children. The parents thought that they should never shy away from a question their child raises. They believed that being able to talk to them openly about everything and being truthful about everything is the best way to raise their biracial children.

### **Summary**

This study sought to bring information and evidence to answer the primary research question: What can we learn about the school experience of biracial children as seen through the eyes of their parents? This question was answered by looking at the lives and experiences of biracial students through the perceptions of their parents. In general, the parents provided everyday experiences that helped them to have open and honest communication with their children so as to prepare their children for the racism that they will encounter. The participants felt that even though their child or children are

beautiful individual human beings, the world will see them differently; they will be viewed as African Americans and their child or children must be prepared for that. Each of the parent participants believed that the best way to prepare their children was to expose them to many different cultures and people and to have open and honest communication, especially when racial incidents occur.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I discuss the lessons learned from this study. The primary question was: What can we learn about the school experience of biracial children as seen through the eyes of their parents? To answer this primary question, the related secondary questions are analyzed through the lens of critical race theory, and the implications for teachers, parents, and educators are discussed. This is followed by a personal reflection from the researcher. According to Dixson & Rousseau (2006), critical race theory can be used to gain insight into the educational experiences of biracial students. It is imperative that a voice be given to people of different races in order to gain a personal narrative, thus allowing their experiences to be conveyed to others so as to empower people to act. The related secondary questions that shaped this study are:

- What are the challenges of raising a biracial child?
- What discussions about race do parents of biracial children have with their children?
- Does being biracial affect a child's identity development? If so, how?
- How does the school experience of biracial children differ from that of other children?

#### **Question 1: What Are the Challenges of Raising a Biracial Child?**

Most of the parent participants who were interviewed said the challenges they have dealt with were other people's perceptions of their children. The Williams family, Erika and Will, stated that they had been married for 27 years but together for 32 years,

so they did not have issues regarding biracial relationships or biracial children. However, their challenge was when Erika began dating Will Williams. Erika's mom was not very accepting of the relationship. Eventually this got worked out and there had not been any problems since. Will Williams knew that his father-in-law saw Tyler as one of his grandkids and not as biracial, and he shared an example of this:

Those boys were his first grandkids. I will give you an example, when I felt like okay they are going to be fine with Grandpa. Her [Erika's] parents live in a farming community, and you know we went to a Dairy Queen, in the country, in a farm town. And Grandpa walked in there with his Grandkids and I knew right then.

Many of the families had similar experiences. The grandparents in these families had a difficult time accepting the relationship that their child was in and believed that the grandchildren, being biracial, would never be accepted by the White community or the Black community. This belief changed in most families once the grandchildren were born, a finding that confirms Helms (1990) who asserted that once a relationship develops, an understanding of race would follow because the people involved could examine their beliefs.

According to Mary Johnson, one of the only problems that occurred with her was that her dad disowned her when she was dating the children's dad, Rodney, who died when the children were little. Her dad would not talk to her until she had the babies. Once she had children, everything changed. Then it was like, there are little human beings and he was a grandfather who spoiled them rotten.

Many of the children in this study were raised around their extended family on both sides. The extended family was important to the parents because they wanted their children to know about and appreciate both sides of their racial heritage and culture.



From the critical race theory lens, this finding confirms the work of Crawford & Alaggia (2010), Moore (2006), and Wright (1998) that it is important for biracial children to have opportunities to be with both sides of their extended family so they would be “comfortable in their own skin.”

Another challenge most of the families faced was when, for the first time, their child was introduced to racism. Sometimes it happened with someone they knew, like another child in their class, or sometimes a complete stranger. They realized that even though they saw their child as being biracial, that is not how the world saw them. A few of the incidents were when another child would not accept their child as a friend because he was viewed as being African American (Walton Family), when their child was made fun of because of his curly hair or how wide the bridge of his nose was (Johnson Family), and when strangers would ask if their child was adopted (Jane).

The Johnsons, as well as the other families, felt one of the challenges facing minorities today is that racism has gone underground. Ray Johnson related how he grew up with different races. In the community where he grew up, if you found yourself on the wrong side of the street, you were discriminated against. It was not spoken about within the community; everyone just knew it. Unconscious or hidden racism, however, can pop up in everyday encounters. This surfaced in the interview exchange when I mentioned how my own biracial son noticed some awkward moments.

Interviewer: My son has been noticing that when I am with him, the cashiers will look at us trying to figure out how we are related. He is 6' and had an Afro. So the cashier will look at me and then at him and then at me like. . .

Nancy: Like he's adopted.

Interviewer: Yeah. He will say Mom, just to let them know. He has noticed it more in the last couple of months.

Nancy: Maybe they notice it more. At least he does it that way. It is a good way to handle it. I guess I have that with Kevin. He is a lot darker than me and he is very tall so he doesn't look anything like me. He looks just like Matt. When I go to pick him up, they'll say, that's your mom. That's it.

Interviewer: You say, yes.

Nancy: They will say she's cool.

Jane agreed with the rest of the families that a major challenge facing biracial children is the way other people see them. Some people have a difficult time accepting biracial people because it disrupts the structure of America's racial order and makes it difficult to preserve White privilege (Baxley, 2008; Nakashima, 1998). Parents in this research taught their biracial children that some adults and children are raised to see color. According to Andy, a single Black father, this is necessary because some kids are raised differently; they view people differently.

This perception held by Andy and other parents in this study affirms the work of Davis (2001) who asserted that even though parents may teach their biracial children about both sides of their heritage and raise them to understand that they are an equal part of both cultures, to much of the world, their dark skin automatically categorizes them as Black with all of the structured, institutional, and interpersonal racism that comes along with it.

## **Question 2: What Discussions About Race Do Parents of Biracial Children Have With Their Children?**

As mentioned previously, all the parent participants believed that open and honest communication was the best policy for their families. When the interviewer asked, "What did you think about the Trayvon Martin incident?" Ericka responded that when that

incident occurred, she had a conversation with Tyler because he has dreads and Tyler looks Black. Additionally, Tyler likes to wear his hats and hoodies. The conversations they had centered around always knowing your surroundings and where you are. Will Williams shared what he and Ericka Williams tried to impress upon Tyler after the Martin shooting:

Will: He has an agent, when he went onto his training in California. His agent told Tyler, you know, in California you need to be chill from the standpoint that they'll pull you over.

Ericka: Cops will pull you over.

Will: Cops will. So, be aware of that and you know don't use your phone while you are driving; you know they'll pull you over and ironically, they were together, and the cops pulled them over.

Erika: Tyler wasn't driving; the agent was.

Will: The agent is Italian or something, but he is dark skinned.

Erika: He looks biracial but I don't know.

Will: He is a big dude and so they were driving a Mercedes or whatever. I always say never forget what you look like and always pay attention to your surroundings because when push comes to shove, when you are with a bunch of people that don't look like you, you are going to be the odd person out broo. So always pay attention to what you look like because it is really important for you not to forget that. And always keep that in the forefront. Don't try to mask that.

Matt and Nancy Walton agreed with Will Williams. They had taught their boys to be aware of their surroundings and to watch their back. Most of the families had conversations with their biracial children on racial issues. The issues that biracial people face today are embedded in our laws and are influenced by society (Parker & Lynn, 2002). Andy always told his daughter that we are all equal, but she is both Black and White. She is really her own person, no different from anyone else. However, when

Andy, who is Black, does see his daughter, he views her as an African American and he thinks she should realize that other people will view her as African American as well.

Similarly, Mary and Ray Johnson had conversations about differences. Mary said that they have brought the kids up educating them on all the different races and all the different religions and everything that's out there. She also added that they had several conversations, mainly when they were young, about how they might be looked at and treated. As they got older, the conversation still remains about how they might be seen and treated, but in a different kind of way. Mary specified the nature of her instruction:

I've had conversations with Kayla and Dustin but the conversations that we have are because she has a mouth on her. She'll sit here and say, "Well that's stupid." She doesn't like it when people judge people based on their color, but at the same time, this is the way, and you need to do what the police is asking, to put your hands up, you put your freaking hands up. If he's asking you to drop your pants, you drop your damn pants. You know? He's the one with the gun and he's the law. They haven't had experiences with being discriminated to that extent. They haven't necessarily had those issues, so who knows.

Mary Johnson's perspective affirmed Delgado and Stefaniec (2001) and Young and Liabe (2000) that to be conscious of the issues that biracial people face, we need to understand how racism is embedded into our society, especially when it comes to dealing with police and laws. Critical race theory mirrors civil rights movements, but includes broader topics such as economics, history, context group, and self-interest. The conversations these families were having, with their children are based on what is happening in society today, and the civil rights and social justice movements that are happening now, especially with the marches and protests spawned from the Black Lives Matter movement.

The families felt that the best way to discuss race with their biracial children is to be open and honest with them; "Answer their questions," and always tell them the truth.

For example, Erika Williams talked about how she and Will Williams had different experiences with race and racism because he is Black and she is White. However, knowing their biracial sons would likely be seen as Black by most people, together they decided never to shy away from talking to their boys about race ever since they were little.

Like other parents in this study, Jane also was adamant about having open and honest discussions about race with her children. Jane believed having discussions about race with her children was important, not just to keep them safe, but to let them know and internalize “this is who you are; you should know whom your people are.” Through their words and actions, the parents were in agreement with research showing that biracial children who learn from their parents that they do not have to accept one race over the other are better prepared to deal with the pressures from society (Kerwin et al., 1993; Moore, 2006).

### **Question 3: Does Being Biracial Affect a Child’s Identity Development? If So, How?**

Although somewhat reluctantly at first, the parents did agree that being biracial affected their child’s identity development in some way. However, at the same time, almost all felt their children could identify with *both* races. Offered as a kind of proof of how easily and often their children’s social lives transcend racial boundaries, many parent participants pointed out that their children have a wide mixture of multicultural friends. Nakazawa (2003) asserted that in order to form and maintain a strong sense of self-identity, it is essential for children, including biracial children, to see themselves reflected in the home and school communities of which they are a part. Nancy and Matt Walton did note, however, that their children’s behavior changes slightly from one group

of friends to the other. Their talk and demeanor change. That being said, Nancy and Matt believed that their sons' choice of friends has less to do with race and more to do with the classes they are enrolled in at school. Their son, Kevin, takes all honors classes, so he likes hanging out with the honors students. The primary reason they hang out and play ball together is because they are all honor students. When it comes to teenagers, Root (1996) found that the majority of biracial teens are comfortable with their identity, but sometimes struggle with other people defining them racially.

Mary Johnson, like the Walton's, also believed that her biracial daughter's school friends have more to do with shared interests rather than race. While at home though, Mary recalled her oldest daughter teasing her youngest daughter, who was the whitest because of her skin tone. As a result, Mary believed her youngest daughter became more conscious of color at a younger age.

The loving confines of the family home cannot entirely shield a biracial child from race-related teasing; however, being around members of both sides of an extended Black/White family structure can make being biracial normal. Such was the case with the Williams family. Will Williams explained why it was not necessary to discuss being biracial with his son:

We have never said, oh, you are a biracial child. We've never said to him you are a biracial child. You know, you're my son and you're my son. But, I will say that because they had a strong connection with both sides of the family, you know there was nothing hidden. My side of the family is different than her side of the family, in all sense of the word. They met their grandparents and great grandparents. So, I think that because they have had opportunities to be with everybody, they are just comfortable in their skin because of that. They know everybody and their cousins are biracial, on her side of the family. And they are all the same age, so they just connect.

Nakazawa (2003) maintained that when biracial children regularly interact with positive multiracial role models within the family structure, they are more likely to develop a greater comfort level with their own identity and a strong internalized sense that it's okay to be racially different. Likewise, if the family does not make an issue of, or have a problem with race, neither will their children (Nakazawa, 2003). However, racial identity, like self-identity, takes time to develop.

In her interview, Jane recounted how her biracial daughters, Sue and Mia, differently identified racially at various ages in their lives and how, as a White mother, she tried to feed, nurture, and positively direct their biracial identity development.

Jane: Sue has always drawn herself as brown and dark brown. She's not that dark really, although in the summer, she's actually the same shade as my husband. Mia has always drawn herself as tan.

Interviewer: That's interesting. Does she do the hair dark then to?

Jane: They both do their hair dark and they'll both do curls and puffs when they draw themselves. There was a time Mia did not want a Black doll because they were mean. Mia did not play with dolls very much, but she was playing with Barbies. She was little, under the age of five, they were mean, and they were not beautiful. You better believe it; I bought every Black Barbie there was and baby dolls and every else. I would buy the Asian ones; I would put them all. I got everybody because beauty comes in all different shapes. I think the important thing for parents is not to be freaked out by it. They don't have the same messages of race that we grew up with.

Even though the parent participants had different experiences and perspectives in regard to their child's racial identity development, most believed being biracial is just who their child is. The most important thing was that their child would grow up believing in him or her self. Wright (1998) believed that biracial children who are expected by their parents to identify with one race will struggle with who they are. The parents believed if you love your child for who they are, they would identify with both races. It was also

important to be open and honest about race and to teach biracial children about both sides of their racial heritage. This affirms the research of Poston (1990) and Rockquemore et al. (2009) who found that a biracial child's feeling of self-worth is rooted in the family, and children raised in a supportive, positive biracial family milieu are much more likely as teenagers and young adults to identify themselves as members of the "human race." Likewise, at the broader societal level, Tatum (2003) found that biracial children with strong ties to the Black community are more likely to value, express, and embrace both sides of their racial heritage. Several parents mentioned that their children *liked* being biracial. By growing up with an appreciation of both sides of their racial heritage, the parents sought to provide their biracial children with a realistic and rich foundation of who they are and what they can become in society.

#### **Question 4: How Does the School Experience of Biracial Children Differ From That of Other Children?**

Each of the parent participants could recall one or more incidents where their children were treated differently at school because they were biracial. The children encountered racism in different forms and situations at school. Some incidents, innocently enough, arose when other children would ask questions because they were curious. Nakawaza (2005) pointed out that children are naturally curious and will ask why a child looks different from his or her parents. When responding to questions from other children, Jane recalled times when she talked to her daughter's friends about race. Jane explained that this mostly happened when she was picking up her daughter after school at a friend's house:

Their friends would say, you can't be her mommy; she's brown! I'd be like, "Well, I'm her mommy and her daddy is brown. She has a little bit of both of us." I have a child development background; for me it never bothered me. When kids



ask questions, they ask questions because they don't know. I'd so much rather deal with that than their parents going, "Shh." Why? You're teaching that race is bad.

Away from parental intervention, while in school, biracial children may encounter racism in the form of teasing by other children for being black or brown. Mary Johnson said her boys were teased at school because they had a wider bridge on their nose and curly hair. Mary, and the other parents, attributed this kind of unconscious racism to the fact the school population was mostly White, and so the classrooms did not have representations in books and pictures of different races. Nakazawa (2003) argued that, when it comes to the school experience, public school classrooms should be filled with books, toys, and pictures that represent all races.

To avoid or at least reduce race-related problems while in school, when their children were eligible to apply to enter first grade, many parents opted to send their children to a school where there was a significant mix of race and ethnicity. Acting preemptively, after finishing preschool, Erika Williams took her boys on a tour of a highly-rated elementary school. Upon returning home, the boys admitted they were uncomfortable because it felt like the people at the school had never seen Black people before. Erika immediately began searching for another highly rated but more diverse school for her sons.

Regarding the value of being proactive when choosing a school for their biracial children, Ray and Mary Johnson felt that a racially and ethnically mixed school setting took care of a lot of potential problems around race:

Ray: They had so many different races as friends and they never had to deal with that.

Mary: The girls too, because of the fact that they went to the schools they went to and they followed along with their friends, that it was so racially diverse, that's all they ever knew.

O'Donoghue (2005) found that White women with racially mixed children often choose a diverse geographic community to live in and have their kids attend school.

However, a lot can change between elementary and high school.

As their children grew older, many of the parent participants reported an increase in the incidents of racism when their children were in high school. Two families reported that their male child was called the N-word. The Walton family believed the incident was due more to jealousy than racism. According to Nancy Walton, the young man who called her son the N-word was a popular young man around school and did not like it that the girls liked her son. Wright (1998) confirmed that it is beneficial when teachers intervene when children are acting out racial prejudices. Alert teachers and other adults in the school can do a lot to mediate this kind of peer-to-peer racism.

However, one father reported that it was a teacher in high school who would not give his son credit for turning in assignment, even though he had seen his son turn in the assignment. The father let the teacher know that he viewed the teacher's actions to be racist. He further let the teacher know that he would be watching him from then on for any other signs of racist behavior. In this case, the parent felt he had to immediately intervene when a teacher was perceived to be exhibiting racist behavior and sentiment.

Most parents could recall at least one incident when they had to confront racism at their child's school. Even though most of the incidents were perceived by the parents as being unconscious or innocent, others were just too blatant to ignore. All of the parent

participants believed it is imperative to address any race-related issues or incidents at school involving their child as soon as it was brought to their attention.

Finally, how Black history was taught in the school was an issue for many parents in the study. At home, the parents taught their children to be proud of their Black heritage. While at school, however, Black history month seemed to be overly focused on slavery. This difference in focus from positive at home to negative at school created a dissonance and some amount of distress and confusion for the biracial children. Jane recounted how she and her husband dealt with their daughter Sue's growing discontent around Black history:

We've taken real pride and strive to teach them about the kingdoms of Kush and the pharaohs and how civilization started in Africa. Sue struggled because she's just starting to hear the idea that Black people sold Black people during slavery. My husband broke it down for her historically, the different understandings of what slavery was. That the Black chiefs sold other Black chiefs into slavery, in Africa, slavery meant you were part of that tribe; you worked for a little while; and eventually you married in and became part of the tribe. They did not understand what they were sending the people off for. When people tell you that Black people sold Black people, it's different.

Nancy and Matt Walton also felt they had to have a discussion with their son, Marc, about what Black history is really about and what is taught and not taught in school.

Interviewer: So when you have had discussions about race what kinds of questions have they asked? What kind of conversations have you had?

Nancy: History, Marc has talked about Black history a lot. Recently, they are studying it. He was exposed to stuff that was bad and the very violent stuff. And he didn't know at all.

Matt: I told him the truth.

Nancy: His eyes were open to that part of it.

Matt: Because he was hearing things that wasn't true from the teachers and I was explaining to him that this is the truth. You can Google it and trust me you can find the truth.

Even though they were mostly positive about their children's experiences with school, the parents did admit that biracial children probably did have school experiences that differed from White children. Young and Laible (2001) determined that racism goes beyond individual acts of discrimination, violence, and exclusion. Race and racism remain systematic and embedded into our education system, laws, policies, as well as everyday life. Schools are one place where biracial children must deal with other people's assumptions about their families (Steel, 1995). That being said, besides the few incidents of racism that did occur, overall, the parents were happy with their child's school experiences. Most of their children's teachers had been positive and willing to embrace who the children were as individuals. For that, the parent participants thought the teachers had prepared their children well.

### **Implications**

Implications to be drawn from this research fall into three areas:

- Identity Development
- Parents and Families
- Teachers and Teaching Practice

Each one of these implications merits in-depth exploration so as to obtain greater understanding of the experience of biracial children as seen through the eyes of their parents.

## **Identity Development**

In order to understand the home and school experience of biracial children and youth, it is first necessary to understand how they identify themselves. Research on biracialism has produced several models of racial identity development including: marginal man, Black power movement, and the ecological approach (Rockquemore et al., 2009). It is important to note that each of these models was conceived and developed based upon what was happening in society at the time. For example, the marginal man theory (Park, 1928) asserts that being a racially mixed individual living in a racially divided society is, simply put, a problem. Being biracial, for good or bad, mostly bad, was an intractable given reality in early 20th century America.

Then, in the 1960s with the emergence of the civil rights movement and the Black power movement, African Americans and all people of color were inspired and encouraged to embrace their “blackness.” Generations of Black adults, youth, and children born with even a hint of Black physical features would now have nothing to hide, or be ashamed about, but rather have their Black heritage recognized and celebrated. The cultural, economic, and artistic contributions of African Blacks would now be recognized as having played a huge part in the formation of American culture and society.

Today, the ascendant conceptual model for the development of racial identity in children and youth uses an ecological approach. Coming to terms with how rapidly society is now changing, the ecological model allows for the possibility that biracial individuals may not identify with any race, except for the human race (Rockquemore et al., 2009). Now, new opportunities and options for both group and individual self-

identification are constantly emerging. Quick, easy, almost instantaneous access to an ever-growing range of electronic information and communications technologies, especially social media, has so accelerated the pace of change that society can only begin to be defined as something in a continual state of flux. That said, society *will* continue to change and so must our understanding of its shifting dynamics. Thus, it remains important to continue to conduct research on racial identity development and find and propose new models so as to help parents and educators better understand, prepare, and support biracial children and youth as they begin to navigate in society, all the while developing a strong positive self-identity.

### **Parents and Families**

In this study, the parents and families of biracial children were proactive and vigilant in preparing and protecting their children from both implicit and explicit forms of racism. The enduring legacy of the one-drop rule (Davis, 2001) makes it possible that the many people their children will encounter in society view biracial individuals as being African American. Consequently, despite having one Black and one White parent, biracial children need to be prepared early on regarding how to deal with racism and discrimination.

To begin preparing their biracial children for anticipated racism or discrimination to come, the parent participants all agreed that having open and honest discussions with their children about race and racism at home is critical. While the focus and context of the discussions will change and evolve as the children get older, it is *having* these discussions throughout their children's childhood and adolescent years that is the most important thing. The parents felt that biracial children need to feel comfortable asking

their parents anything. Open and honest communication between biracial children and their parents creates a foundation from which the child, adolescent, and eventually young adult begins to build and internalize a positive sense of self-identity and self-worth. In later adult life, the ability and willingness to engage with others in having “hard conversations” about race and racism is practiced and learned early on in the home.

Being surrounded by family members who are good role models and accept them how they are is important for the identity development of biracial children (Johnson, 2004; Nakazawa, 2003; Tatum, 2003). It was also important that their children had experiences that exposed them to different racial and ethnic groups (Nakazawa, 2003). However, being immersed in both their Black and White extended families was necessary for the children to develop positive bonds with both of their heritages (O’Donoghue, 2005; Tatum, 2003; Wright, 1998).

Research on the differing roles played by parents in biracial families has found the Black parent to be more aware and conscious of perceived racism than their White spouses (Kerwin et al., 1993). While White mothers of biracial children will search geographically to find a community with a diverse school population for her children (O’Donoghue, 2005), research by O’Donoghue (2005) found that White mothers of biracial children strongly believe the presence of a Black partner is vital to the social/emotional welfare and safety of their biracial children. Of the parents interviewed for this study, all of these White mothers felt it was the responsibility of their African American husband or Hispanic husband to educate their children about the history of African Americans, and how to deal with the racism the children were likely to face.

## **Teachers and Teaching Practice**

There are several important insights from this study for teachers and their teaching practice. To begin, teachers need to understand how biracial students chose to identify themselves racially. This means being aware that most biracial children and youth have been taught by their parents to equally value both sides of their racial heritage. Teaching and developing curricula without taking into consideration issues biracial students face and may struggle with similar to other ethnic groups, lowers achievement, creates higher dropout rates, and lowers social mobility because these students may feel invisible or disconnected (Chiong, 1998; Lindsey et al., 2006). Nakazawa (2003) stressed that by emphasizing individual student differences, and building multiethnic and multiracial heroes into their curriculums, teachers allow biracial students of all age levels to see and feel that both sides of their heritage are valued.

Adopting culturally sensitive pedagogy is one way to accommodate the cultural, racial, and ethnic differences of students (Cruz-Janzen, 1999). Culturally sensitive teaching and curricula help avoid a classroom environment that is ethnically or racially hostile towards students of multiple heritages. Building a positive classroom environment for biracial, and all children, needs to start at an early age. At the preschool and elementary school level, classrooms should be filled with books, toys, and pictures that represent different races (Nakazawa, 2003). Children need to be taught to view people as individuals, each valuable and unique unto themselves (Wright, 1998). Especially, teachers of young children can help to nurture and develop this perception among students by being sensitive to interracial classroom socialization issues (Reid & Henry, 2000).



In *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?: And Other Conversations About Race*, Tatum (2003) asserted that when biracial children enter high school as teenagers, most have already established a positive self-identity. Tatum (2003) also noted that what is most significant for the children of interracial unions is not what label they claim, but the self-acceptance they have of their multiracial heritage (p. 186). One way teachers can promote interracial harmony at the high school level is by encouraging students to treat each other with respect and kindness (Wright, 1998). Another way to promote interracial harmony is for teachers to act immediately to address any race-related issues or incidents that are brought to their attention.

From the perspective of curriculum regarding what's most worth knowing and experiencing, a third way teachers can promote interracial harmony is by exposing students to common myths about the races, facilitating discussions about the exploitation of racial and ethnic differences in the U.S. and other countries, and teaching students to think critically about information they receive about different races (Wright, 1998). This perspective was affirmed by the parents in this research, especially when it came to teaching Black history. Black History Month, for example, should not be overly focused on negative issues, like slavery, but should include more information and discussion about the accomplishments of all minority people (Wardle, 1999). Finally, teachers can help all students, including biracial students, to grow into self-assured, responsible adults and citizens by abandoning the old saw "color and culture make no difference" that leaves many students of color to feel invisible in the classroom (Lindsey et al., 2006). Race matters.

## **Personal Reflection**

I began this research journey trying to figure out how to ease my trepidation once I realized that my children would be perceived as African American, even though they are biracial, and what that designation means in our society today. A variety of questions fueled my trepidation. If my son was wearing a hoodie and walking at night, would he be looked at as a hoodlum? What expectations, opportunities, and experiences would or would not be afforded to him based solely upon his apparent “race”? Would he be able to compete on an equal footing and be accepted into the college of his choice, or would he be summarily dismissed because of his “race,” prejudged that he was someone who could not possibly “cut it” in college? As a parent of two biracial children, how can I better understand how being biracial has affected my children’s identity development, and as a result, how do they see themselves?

In the midst of this research study, in 2008, the United States of America elected its first biracial president, Barack Obama. This brought hope to many people. Government forms were changed in the section requiring people to identify themselves by a single race. Mixed-race people could now check all the boxes that apply. I saw a small shift in society that gave a glimmer of hope that things were changing for the better. Biracial or mixed-race people were now able to embrace all of their races.

In the course of my reading the literature on this topic, it did not surprise me that different identity models and theories of identity development correlate to the thinking of the particular time period in which they were developed. One current approach to racial identity development uses an ecological approach. According to Rockquemore et al. (2009), the ecological model allows for the possibility that biracial individuals may not

identify with any one race except for the human race. Through this research and my own experiences, I found this to be true. All of the parents I interviewed in this study believed their children saw themselves as not over-identifying with any one race, but viewed themselves as individuals within the human race. This is true for my children as well.

I did not face many challenges when raising my biracial children, especially when they were younger, and neither did many of the parent participants I interviewed. However, as my son has gotten older, he notices how people look at us when we are together, usually trying to figure out how we are related. We talk about incidents like this, and I agree with the families in this study, open and honest communication is the best way to handle it.

Many of the parents interviewed felt they *had* to talk to their children about racism simply because it is part of our society. As responsible parents, they want their children to be prepared to face it when it does happen. This is important for my family as well. My husband and I have both talked to our children about racism and how to handle it because they too will have to deal with racism someday.

In conducting this research, I also learned that it is very important for biracial students to see themselves reflected in the society in which they live. Biracial students need to see and interact with positive biracial role models. Likewise, they should also be encouraged to form friendships with students of differing races. All this is more easily realized when a biracial child lives, attends school, and grows up in a diverse community. The parent participants, through their words and actions, affirmed this to be true.

This research also affirmed what I already felt about my children's community school district. There are many wonderful opportunities open for all children within the

district. Even though there have been individual, isolated incidents of racism reported in the district, most were child-to-child, so it would be naïve to think there will be no more. However, because the community is very diverse, I feel that the adults—teachers and parents, working together—are more than capable of positively raising and educating all of the students in the school district, including multiethnic and biracial students.

Now that this research has come to an end, the only trepidation that lingers is what to do with the realization that racism never really went away during the Obama presidency; it simply went underground for a while. Racial discrimination is out there, once more, and it is being inflamed. What to do about these issues and incidents? How to react? Maybe the answers are as Andy, the single Black father of a biracial child, summarized: “We just have to address them as they come up.” We have to move on. But rather than going backward, I am hoping our country will continue to move forward, to grow more tolerant and not less tolerant, and that more and more people will come to understand that everyone deserves a chance. Andy also offered an assessment about the future: “Until we can weed out generations of hateful people in the world, it is not going to change.” In light of this assessment, the challenge is great. However, as an educator and a parent of two biracial children, I believe in the power of teaching that everyone, and every student, is unique and valuable. This power gives me hope, and I choose to believe that enduring change is possible.

## REFERENCES

- Baxley, T. (2008, Summer). What are you? Biracial children in the classroom. *Issues in Education, 84*(4), 230–233.
- Brenner, M.E. (2006). Interviewing in educational research. In J. Green, G. Camilli & P. Elmore (Eds.), *Handbook of complementary methods in education research* (pp. 357–370). Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.
- CensusScope. (n.d.). United States Multiracial Profile. Retrieved from [http://www.censusscope.org/us/chart\\_multi.html](http://www.censusscope.org/us/chart_multi.html)
- Chiong, J. A. (1998). *Racial categorization of multiracial children in schools*. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey.
- Clandinin, J., Steeves, P., & Caine, V. (2013). Introduction. In J. Clandinin, P. Steeves, & V. Caine (Eds.), *Composing lives in transition: A narrative inquiry into the experiences of early school leavers* (pp.1–15). Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing.
- Connelly, F, & Clandinin, D. (2006). Narrative inquiry. In J. Green, G. Camilli, & P. Elmore (Eds.), *Handbook of complementary methods in education research* (pp. 477–488). Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.
- Crawford, S. E., & Alaggia, R. (2010). The best of both worlds? Family influences on mixed race youth identity development. *Qualitative Social Work, 7*(1), 81–98. Retrieved from <http://qsw.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/7/1/81>
- Cruz-Janzen, J. I. (1999). You are not enough: The faceless lives of biethnic and biracial Americans a challenge for truly inclusive multicultural education. *Multicultural Perspective, 1*(4), 3–8.

- Davis, F. (2001). *Who is black? One nation's definition*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Delgado R., & Stefancic, J. (2001). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in classroom*. New York, NY: The New Press.
- Dixson, A., & Rousseau, C. (2006). *Critical race theory in education*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gibbs, J. T., & Hines, A. M. (1992). Negotiating ethnic identity: Issues for black–white biracial adolescents. In M. P. P. Root (Ed.), *Racially mixed people in America* (pp. 223–238). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gilbert, D. (2005). Interrogating mixed-race: A crisis of ambiguity? *Social Identities*, 11(1), 55–74.
- Helms, J. (1990). *Black and white racial identity development: Theory, research, and practice*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Jackson, K. (2010). *Biracial black/white experience*. Mixed Heritage Center. Retrieved from [http://mixedheritagecenter.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=819&Itemid=19](http://mixedheritagecenter.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=819&Itemid=19)
- Johnson, J. (2004). *Learning to be different: A white mother of biracial children experiences in racism* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN.

- Kerwin, C., Ponterotto, J. G., Jackson, B. L., & Harris, A. (1993, April). Racial identity in biracial children: A qualitative investigation. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 40*(2), 221–231.
- Lee, S. J. (2005). *Up against whiteness: Race, school, and immigrant youth*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Lindsey, R. B., Robins, K. N., & Terrell, R. D. (2006). *Cultural proficiency: A manual for school leaders* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Maple, S. (2008). Child's school enrollment isn't black or white. *Parentdish*. Retrieved from <http://www.parentdish.com/2008/08/18/childs-school-enrollment-isnt-black-or-white>
- Moore, T. (2006). *Mixed: Experiences of biracial students in an urban high school* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN.
- Merriam, S. (2002). *Qualitative research in practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Nakashima, C. L. (1992). An invisible monster: The creation and denial of mixed-race people in America. In M. P. P. Root (Ed.), *Racially mixed people in America* (pp.162–178). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Nakazawa, D. J. (2003). *Does anybody else look like me? A parent's guide to raising multiracial children*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Lifelong Books.
- O'Donoghue, M. (2005). White mothers negotiating race and ethnicity in the mothering of biracial, black-white adolescents. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work, 14*(3/4), 125–156.
- Park, R. E. (1928). Human migration and the marginal man. *The American Journal of Sociology, 33*(6), 881–893. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2765982>

- Parker, L., & Lynn, M. (2002, February). What's race got to do with it? Critical race theory's conflicts with and connections to qualitative research methodology and epistemology. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 7–22. Retrieved from EBSCOhost.
- Pascoe, P. (2004). Why the ugly rhetoric against gay marriage is familiar to this historian of miscegenation. *The History News Network*. Retrieved from <http://hnn.us/articles/4708.html>
- Poston, C. (1990). The biracial identity development model: A needed addition. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 69, 152–156.
- Reid, E., & Henry, G. (2000, February 21–26). *Waiting to excel: Biraciality in the classroom*. Proceedings from the National Association of African American Studies & National Association of Hispanic and Latino Studies 200 Literature monograph series, 555–586, Houston, TX.
- Rockquemore, K., Brunson, D., & Delgado, D. (2009, January). Racing to theory or retheorizing? Understanding the struggle to build a multiracial identity theory. *Journal of Social Issues*, 65(1), 13–34.
- Root, M. P. P. (1992). Within, between, and beyond race. In M.P.P. Root (Ed.), *Racially mixed people in America* (pp. 3–11). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Root, M. P. P. (1996). *The Multicultural experience: Racial borders as the new frontier*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Saulny, S. (2011, March 24). Census data presents rise in multiracial population of youth. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/25/us/25race.html>



- Stake, R. E. (2010). *Qualitative research: Studying how things work*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Steel, M. (1995, Spring). New colors: Mixed-race families still find a mixed reception. *Teaching Tolerance*, 4(1), 45-49.
- Tatum, B. (2003). *Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria and other conversations about race*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Wardle, F. (1999). *Tomorrow's children: Meeting the needs of multiracial and multiethnic children at home, in early childhood programs, and school*. Denver, CO: Center for the Study of Biracial Children.
- Wardle, F. (2000). Multiracial and multiethnic students: How they must belong. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 2(4), 11–16.
- Wright, M. (1998). *I'm chocolate, you're vanilla: Raising healthy black and biracial children in a race-conscious world. A guide for parents and teachers*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Young, M. D., & Laible, J. (2000). White racism, anti-racism, and school leader preparation. *Journal of School Leadership*, 10(5), 371–415.

## APPENDIX A

### Interview Questions

The primary research question is: What are your experiences raising a biracial child?

Related questions include:

1. Can you tell me what it is like to raise a biracial child?
2. As a parent of a biracial child, can you recall any incidents or experiences involving race or racial identity that may have had either positive or negative affects on your child's development?
3. Are there any particular challenges you have faced as a parent of a biracial child?
4. As a parent of a biracial child, are there any particular beliefs or values you hold that you feel have positively influenced the development of your child's sense of self as a biracial individual?
5. Can you recall any school-related experiences relating to race that may have positively or negatively affected your child's academic career?
6. What race or ethnic background are most of your child's friends?
7. How have you discussed race with your child?
8. What recommendations do you have that might contribute to the experiences that may help your biracial child be successful?
9. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

## APPENDIX B

### **Informed Consent Form**

Sandra Washington Consent Form 02/12/16

#### Informed Consent

My name is Sandra Washington. I am a graduate student at National Louis University located in Illinois. The purpose of this interview is to gain a better understanding of biracial children through the eyes of their parents. In this interview, we will discuss issues of raising and educating biracial children. I will be asking you questions on a range of topics, including but not limited to: racial awareness, discrimination, educational aspects, and racial/ethnic identity. Any additional information that you wish to initiate is welcome. This interview should last anywhere from 30 to 60 minutes, and if needed, there could be another interview on a follow-up basis. This interview will take place in a semi-private setting. The setting will be where you feel most comfortable, either at your house or at my house. With your permission, this conversation will be recorded for analysis purposes only. Your identity, as well as those of others you may mention, will be concealed in order to protect your confidentiality. All names will be changed in the data as well as in subsequent publications. Each interview will be assigned a number. The researcher, who will act as a scribe for analysis purposes only, will be the only one to listen to the recordings. The recordings, notes, and transcribed interviews will be secured in a locked box in the researcher's home. The researcher, Sandra Washington, will be the only one with access to the recording, notes,

and transcribed interviews. Once everything you stated is in written form, you will be given a copy of the transcript to peruse to insure it is accurate and correct. Your participation is strictly voluntary. When the study is complete, the audio recordings will be erased. The results of the research will be shared with the participants in written form if requested. This study presents no risk to the participants. At any time during the course of this interview, you have the right to withdraw your participation and data from this study. If at any time you have a question regarding this research, your participation rights, or me, you may contact the Dissertation Chair, Dr. Norman Weston at (773) 465-0601 or at [nweston@nl.edu](mailto:nweston@nl.edu). You may also contact the EDL Program Chair, Dr. Harrington Gibson at (224) 233-2290 or at [Harrington.gibson@nl.edu](mailto:Harrington.gibson@nl.edu). You may also contact the NLU IRRB Chair, Dr. Shaunti Knauth, [shaunti.knauth@nl.edu](mailto:shaunti.knauth@nl.edu) or at (312) 261-3526. Again, the researcher is Sandra Washington, who can be contacted at [swashington12@nl.edu](mailto:swashington12@nl.edu). For your knowledge, the Institutional Review Board at National Louis University in Illinois has approved the research.

---

Participant's Signature

---

Date